FRANCIS THE LAST POPE?

SIGNS, PORTENTS, AND THE PROPHECIES OF MALACHY

FISHY BUSINESS THE DEERNESS MERMAID MYSTERY

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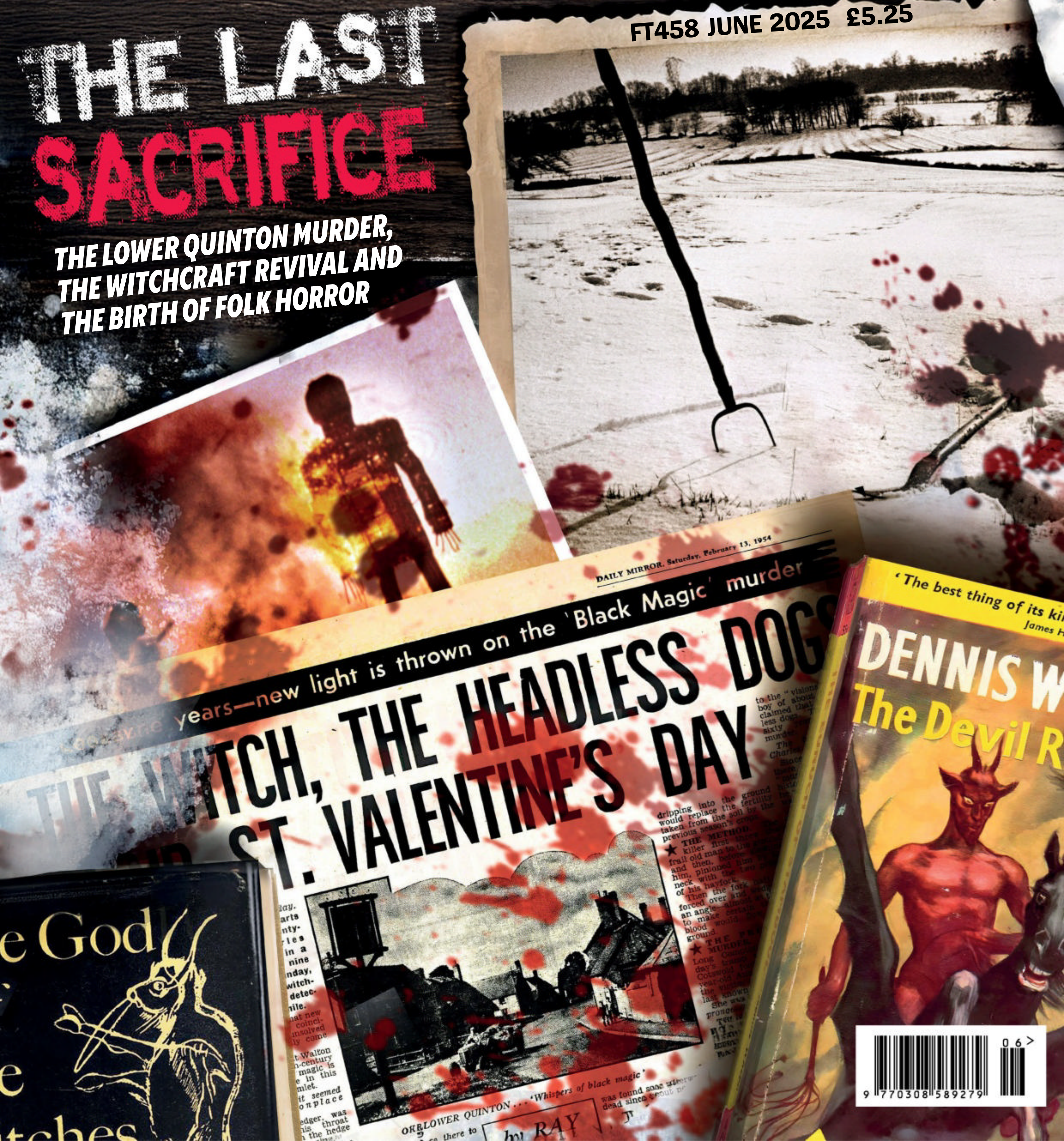
THE LAST SACRIFICE

THE LOWER QUINTON MURDER, THE WITCHCRAFT REVIVAL AND THE BIRTH OF FOLK HORROR



DAILY MIRROR, Saturday, February 13, 1954

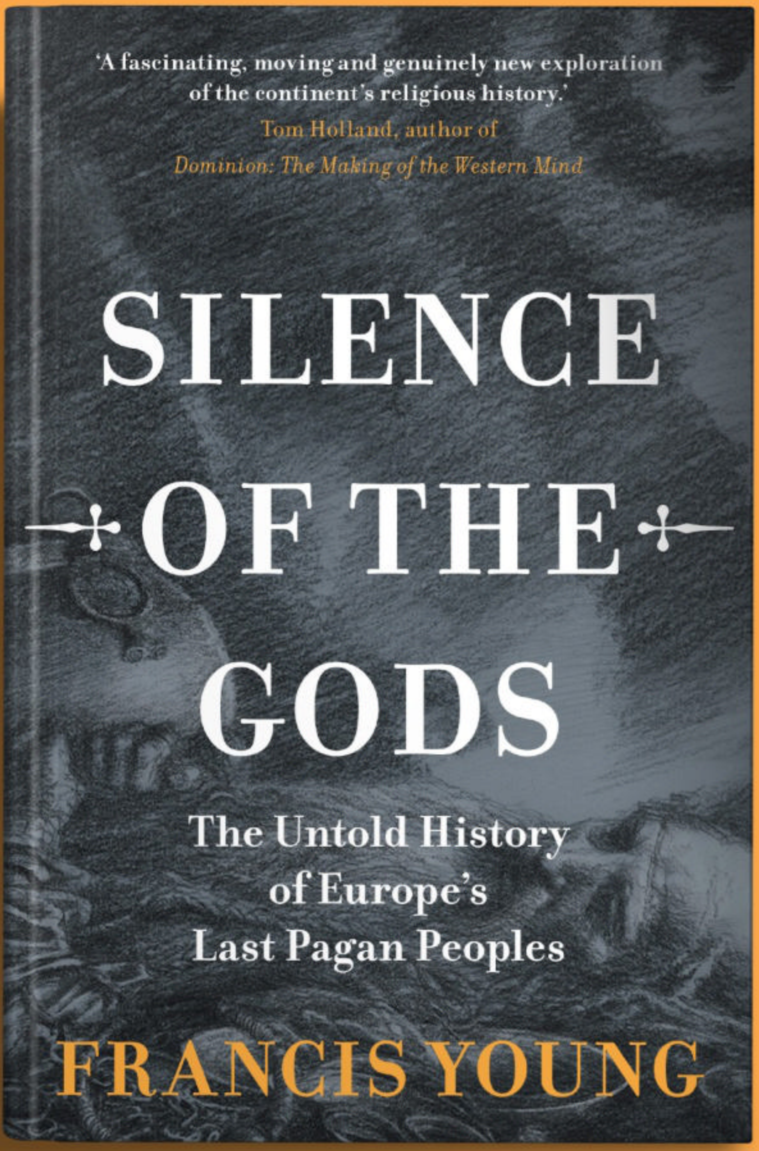
years—new light is thrown on the 'Black Magic' murder

THE WITCH, THE HEADLESS DOGS AND ST. VALENTINE'S DAY

dripping into the ground would replace the fertility taken from the soil by the previous season's crops.

★ THE METHOD

LOWER QUINTON . . . 'Whispers of black magic'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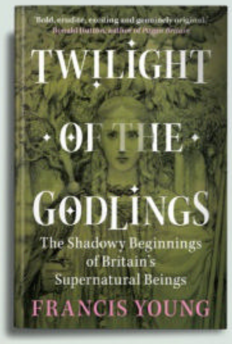
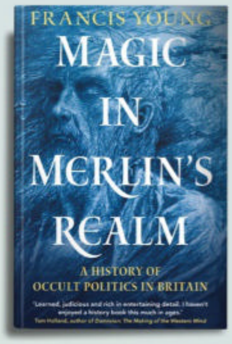

TWILIGHT OF THE GODLINGS
The Shadowy Beginnings of Britain's Supernatural Beings
FRANCIS YOUNG

Twilight of the Godlings

The Shadowy Beginnings of Britain's Supernatural Beings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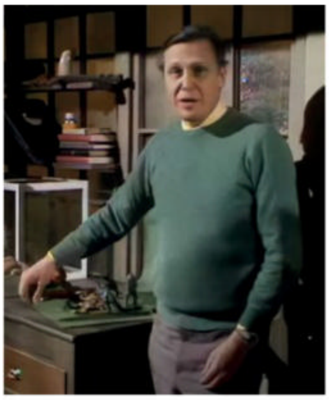

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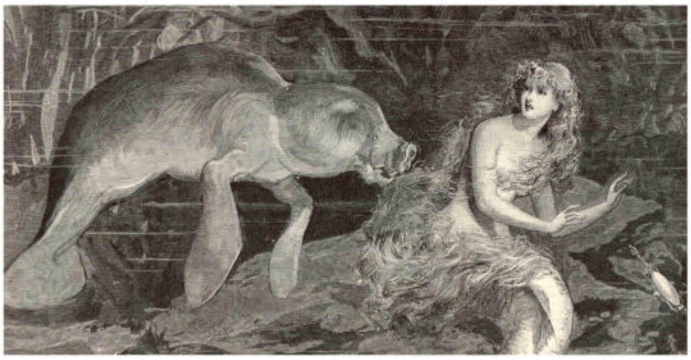

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NATIONAL OCEANOGRAPHY CENTRE
CHRONICLE / ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

ForteanTimes
THE LAST SACRIFICE

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Why fortean ?

Everything you always wanted to know about *Fortean Times* but were too paranoid to ask!

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36 WHAT WAS THE DEERNESS MERMAID?

For nearly 20 years in the late 19th century a 'mermaid' was a regular visitor to Deerness on Orkney, and the sheer volume of witness testimony makes this one of the best-documented of fortean mysteries. But what was the Deerness Mermaid? **SIMON YOUNG** rounds up the usual and unusual suspects...

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ETIENNE GILFILLAN

MEON HILL PHOTO:
TRINITY MIRROR / ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

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EDITORIAL

CAPUCINE DESLOUIS

SEASON OF THE WITCH

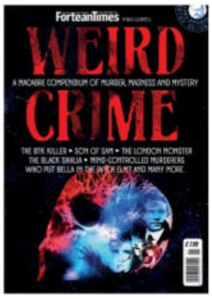
The late Ken Russell made some rather fortean films in his long career – *The Devils* (1971), *Altered States* (1980) and *Gothic* (1986) spring particularly to mind – but his son Rupert Russell's work as a writer and director up until now has been largely focused on exploring current geopolitical and economic issues in documentaries like *Freedom for the Wolf* (2017) and *Price Wars* (2021). His latest film, though, is something of a departure: *The Last Sacrifice* takes as its starting point the infamous 'Witchcraft Murder' of 1945, in which farm labourer Charles Walton was brutally done in with his own pitchfork and slash hook on the slopes of Meon Hill, Lower Quinton. From there, it explores Britain's witchcraft revival, the work of Margaret Murray, Dennis Wheatley, Hammer films and folk horror classic *The Wicker Man* in a unique trawl through the weirder aspects of British national identity.

FT stalwart and crime novelist Cathi Unsworth (whose account of the Walton murder can be found in **FT381:44-51**) sat down for a long chat with Rupert about the film's genesis and themes, and found that his political and economic concerns weren't absent from his latest film, but instead formed a subtext that threads its way through it, from murder most foul to modern folk horror: Boris Johnson as Lord Summerisle, anyone?

Elsewhere we have weird creatures aplenty – Simon Young investigates the Deerness Mermaid, Richard Freeman celebrates David Attenborough's long unseen series *Fabulous Animals*, and Sharon Hill says that Mothman cosplay is probably the future of cryptozoology – as well as Zizians, Ummites, Yakuza and hermits, a colossal squid caught on camera and the death of Pope Francis.

MURDER MOST STRANGE

If revisiting the Lower Quinton murder turns your thoughts to bizarre homicides, then look no further than our new bumper archive collection, *Fortean Times Presents... Weird Crime*. From the horrific murders and cryptic puzzles of the BTK Killer to the mystery of the unidentified man found poisoned on an Australian beach, this new special edition re-opens the files on some of the oddest and most baffling crimes. Were the Son of Sam murders part of a Satanic conspiracy? Who put Bella in the Wych Elm? Could alien mind control explain a spate of bizarre killings? Was the gruesome Black Dahlia case the work of a frustrated artist? Can you be hypnotised into committing murder? All this plus a buttock-stabbing phantom stalking London, the doggy detective of Blackburn and more. And Cathi Unsworth is on hand to provide updates, analysis and commentary on the articles.



ForteanTimes PRESENTS
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WHO PUT BELLA IN THE WYCH ELM? AND MANY MORE

Weird Crime is in shops now, or you can order your copy from https://shop.forteantimes.com/products/books.

ERRATA

454:15: FT contributor Sharon Hill noted that in our coverage of "The Great Drone Panic" we'd twice referred to sceptic "Mick Wall" instead of "Mick West".

454:59: The Simulacra Corner photo of the Doagh Island face should have been attributed to Dave Johnston (not "Johnson").

455:66: Tom Ruffles spotted a typo in Tony Sandy's letter; the reference to "Myre's subliminal consciousness" should, of course, have been "Myers's", as in FWH Myers, one of the founders of the Society for Psychical Research.

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STRANGE DAYS

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A DIGEST OF THE WORLDWIDE WEIRD

STRANGE DAYS

THE POPE PASSES ON

The death of Pope Francis proves a focus for prophecies, signs and portents

ASSOCIATED PRESS / ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

LEFT: Francis takes his final journey across Rome in the Popemobile. **BELOW**: The weeping Virgin of Aguas Claras. **OPPOSITE PAGE**: One of the many images of the Tejupilco sky cross posted online.

While Catholic Popes no longer hold the temporal power that their mediæval predecessors did, the Catholic church has never been larger, and it has a major influence over the lives of huge numbers of people. As a result, whenever a Pope passes it is a time of signs and portents as well as time-honoured ritual, and so it has proved with the death of Pope Francis II, who died at the age of 88 on Easter Monday.

Francis's death immediately after celebrating Easter suggests this might be an example of the "Passover Effect". This idea is derived from a 1988 paper in *The Lancet* medical journal where sociologists David Phillips and Elliot King analysed mortality patterns for Jewish men in the period surrounding Passover, finding a sharp decline immediately before the holiday, followed by a marked increase afterwards. This suggested that people were managing to delay their deaths in order to celebrate a particularly important religious festival – and who would be more likely to hold on for Easter than a Pope?

Hundreds of people in Mexico saw a cross appear in the clouds

FACEBOOK

The signs and portents, though, didn't get the message, and started early; on Good Friday, a statue of the Virgin Mary in St John Eudes Parish, in Aguas Claras, Colombia, was videoed weeping during the pre-Easter Sermon of the Seven Words, which focuses on the seven words Jesus spoke while on the cross, and this was subsequently taken as a foreshadowing of Pope Francis's death. Then, on Easter Sunday, hundreds of people taking part in a religious procession in Tejupilco, Mexico, saw a cross appear in the clouds just a few hours before the Pope died. Many participants photographed the cloud image and posted it on social media, to mixed reactions; one photographer said "It's incredible what's happening here!" Another bystander was more sceptical, saying, "Excuse me, it's just airplane crap," with another adding, "No, they're chemtrails." Both alleged miracles, though, are being seen as relating to Pope Francis, at least partly because they took place in Latin America, and Francis, who came from Argentina, was the first Latin American Pope.

Inevitably, with the death of a Pope, the prophecies of St Malachy are dusted off and scrutinised. This document, titled "The Prophecies of the Popes", is claimed to have been written by the Irish saint in 1139, but it was only discovered in the Vatican archives in 1590. It is made up of a series of 109 cryptic statements, one for each Pope, starting with Pope Celestine II, who briefly reigned from September 1143 to March 1144. The verses are quite clear for the Popes between the time of Celestine and the document's discovery, but markedly more cryptic afterwards, raising the suspicion that it is a 16th century forgery, particularly as St Bernard of Clairvaux makes no mention of these prophecies, despite being a close friend of Malachy. Nonetheless, Malachy's alleged prophecies have been considered reasonably accurate in relation to many of the subsequent pontiffs; for example, Pope John Paul II's verse refers to "from the toil of the sun", which is believed to

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Humungous neutrinos and cars in orbit
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PYRAMID POWER
A hidden city under the Giza plateau?
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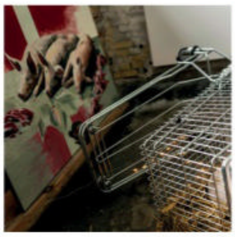


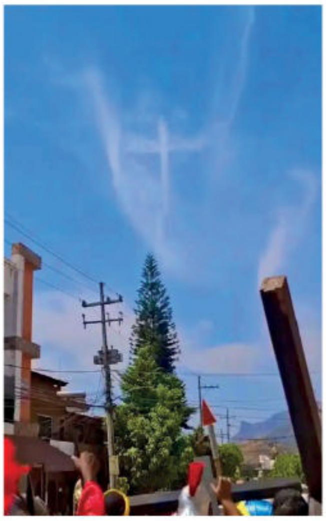
STRANGE CONTINENT
Piggy art prank, mystery bells and quakes
PAGE 20

relate to his birth during a solar eclipse, while Francis's predecessor, Benedict, is described as "the glory of the olive" because the Order of St Benedict is also known as the Olivetans.

Where these become particularly relevant today is that counting down the list of popes from Celestine, Pope Francis is the final one, and gets a longer entry than the rest. This reads: "In the final persecution of the Holy Roman Church there will reign Peter the Roman, who will feed his flock amid many tribulations, after which the seven-hilled city will be destroyed and the dreadful Judge will judge the people. The End." – which potentially suggests Pope Francis's death could spark Armageddon. This is an ominous prospect, not helped by the apocalyptic nature of events in Gaza, with which Francis was passionately engaged, and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu making allusions to a potentially imminent "Battle at Megiddo" in an interview with an evangelical US journalist.

Author Robert Howells, who has researched and written about the Malachy prophecies, believes there is room for interpretation, saying: "Technically, the destruction could be 1,000 years from now. It could just be saying that this is the last Pope that's on the list. It doesn't necessarily link the two. It might just be symbolic." He also notes: "There is another prophecy about the Pope leaving the Vatican as it collapses, like there's some physical destruction. But Malachy's doesn't really have that in its most basic form. It just talks about the final persecution." The Vatican, though, has nothing to say on the matter and will neither confirm nor deny the accuracy of St Malachy's visions because they have a strict "no authentication of prophecies" policy.

Nostradamus also gets in on the act; while his prophecies are notoriously open to interpretation, as they mostly avoid giving names or dates, many people have felt that there is one that relates to the death of Pope Francis. This says "Through the death of a very old Pontiff / A Roman of good age will be elected / Of him it will be said that he weakens his seat / But long will he sit and in mordant activity," suggesting that whoever succeeds Francis will act in a way that weakens the standing of the Catholic Church. There is also a second prediction from Nostradamus – "A young man of dark skin with the help of the great king will deliver the purse to another of red colour" – which some feel points to an African successor to Francis, although to describe either of the African cardinals thought to be in contention as a "young man" is a bit of a stretch: Peter Turkson, from Ghana, is 76, while Robert Sarah, from Guinea, is 79.



TIKTOK

The last person to have an official meeting with Pope Francis, just a few hours before he died, was the new US Vice President JD Vance, a recent convert to Catholicism who espouses a right wing conservative version of the faith. This is very different to the compassionate progressive approach taken by the Holy Father, who had all but directly criticised Vance's interpretation of scripture in a statement made in February, and some suggested that the stress of the meeting had been instrumental in bringing on the Pontiff's fatal stroke. However, while this is unlikely to be the case, Vance swiftly gained a reputation for being cursed. His next stop after the Vatican was India, and his arrival there coincided with a massacre by Kashmir separatists. This prompted reports that the Dalai Lama had "quietly cancelled" a meeting with Vance, allegedly due to a scheduling clash, but in fact because he "didn't want to die". Widely reported as fact online and in a number of publications, the story actually originated with the satirical website *The Babylon Bee* and there had been no meeting planned between the two.

Once Francis died, the full Vatican ritual apparatus swung into action. His death was certified by a doctor who was observed by the papal chamberlain, or camerlengo, Irish-born Cardinal Kevin Farrell, responsible for running papal affairs until a new Pope is elected. Contrary to popular belief, Francis's death was not confirmed by tapping on his forehead with a ceremonial silver hammer while his baptismal name was called out three times. Theologian Ulrich Lehner says, "The hammer episode is an old tale which is not mentioned in any official text" and is purely a myth. Francis stipulated that he wished to be buried in a simple tomb in his favourite church, the Basilica of St Mary Major, just outside the Vatican walls, the first time in 120 years a pope hasn't been buried in the Vatican vaults along with most of his predecessors. The Conclave of Cardinals then meets within 15 to 20 days to elect his successor. *timesofisrael.com, 14 Apr; newrepublic.com, 15 Apr; dailymail.co.uk, express.co.uk, Metro.co.uk, 21 Apr; dailystar.co.uk, hindustantimes.com, 22 Apr; theguardian.com, 21+23 Apr 2025.*

EXTRA! EXTRA!

FT'S FAVOURITE HEADLINES FROM AROUND THE WORLD

COUNCILLOR RESIGNS AFTER CAT EXPLOSION

Times, 11 Feb 2025.

Surgeon General's warning: parenting may be hazardous to your health

USA Today, 16 Sept 2024

GULL AIR SUPPORT FOR RAT INVASION

D.Star, 9 Nov 2024.

Vegan kidnapped lamb, put it in nappy and nearly killed it

Times, 3 April 2025.

ALCOHOL MAKES MALE FRUIT FLIES MORE ATTRACTIVE

BBC News, 2 April 2025.

SIDELINES

MAKING THEIR OWN WORK

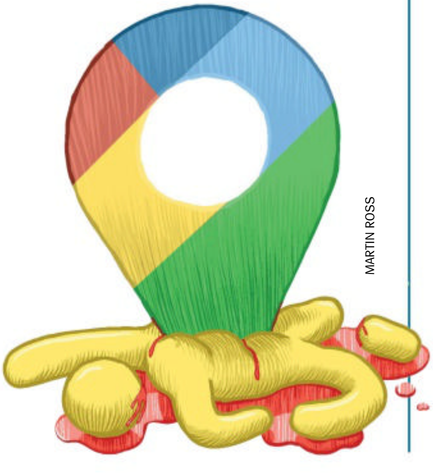
Having been run over and seriously injured by an ambulance making a sudden turn in Ranier, Oregon, cyclist William Hoesch was picked up by the vehicle and rushed to hospital, then charged $1,862 for the ride by Oregon Ambulance Service. *people.com, 7 Nov 2024.*

CLAIMS FALL FLAT

Flat Earther Jeram Campanella was so certain he was right that he paid for a trip to Antarctica to prove the continent was just part of an ice wall around the edge of the disc, over which the Sun rises and sets each day, meaning the midnight Sun is a hoax. He arrived to the spectacle of 24 hour sunlight and in a TikTok after his visit said, "Sometimes you are wrong in life, the Sun does in fact circle in the south", although he added, "I won't say the Earth is a perfect sphere." *Metro, 20 Dec 2024.*

GOOGLED

Police investigating the disappearance of a Cuban man tracked him to Soria in Spain, where his mangled torso was found in a cemetery. Suspicion fell on the Cuban's former partner and the man she now lived with, but the case was strengthened when it was found that the Google Maps Streetview camera had caught the male suspect loading a body-shaped sack into his car. The image was subsequently added to Streetview and still appears on Google Maps. Police confirmed that they had evidence "detected during an investigation of a mapping application" that had helped "detect a vehicle that may have been used in the course of the crime". *theguardian.com, 18 Dec 2024.*



MARTIN ROSS

ODD CRIMEWAVE

Fictional countries, Pokémon heists, snail scams and weird red paint attacks

闇バイト家族
SHADY JOB FAMILY

ABOVE: Japan has seen a new crimewave of "dark part-time jobs, or *yamibaito*; the trend has been so pronounced that it has even given rise to its own television comedy show, "Shady Job Family".

CRIMINALS AGAINST CRIME

For generations, organised crime in Japan has been overseen by the yakuza, who have had a finger in almost every criminal activity that could turn a profit. Now, though, a new kind of crime has arisen that the yakuza families have denounced. This is known as *yamibaito*, which translates as "dark part-time jobs", and is essentially the gig economy for crime. An anonymous employer posts a job offer on social media promising unusually high pay for a one-off job, but when applicants respond, they find out that the "job" is carrying out robbery, fraud or violence. This can range from smash-and-grab raids on shops to Pokémon card heists and even violent home invasions, and once people have signed up, the criminals intimidate them to prevent them pulling out. This has offended the yakuza, with the Eleventh Generation Himonya Family of the Inagawa-kai and the Sixth Generation Yamaguchi-gumi, the biggest yakuza group in Japan, condemning *yamibaito* and prohibiting their members from participating in it. "We are working to create a safe community," said the Himonya Family.

Not everyone is convinced that the yakuza aren't involved in *yamibaito*, with the police raiding the Dojin-kai yakuza on suspicion of running *yamibaito* operations, but others have said, "Those guys are all too old to use the internet," and, "Yamibaito worsens public order and safety for minimal financial gain, which isn't the yakuza's style." *japantoday.com, 1 Dec 2024.*

Jobs range from smash-and-grab raids to Pokémon heists

SUSPICIOUS SNAILS

Liverpool City Council have voiced their suspicions that a "snail farm" in the basement of an otherwise empty office building in Dale Street is simply a means of dodging business rates. However, the renters, Snai1 Primary Products 2023 Ltd, claim to be legitimate snail farmers. As a result, they have obtained an exemption for "agricultural use" on part of the premises because the basement houses 15 covered crates, each containing two snails. However, suspicions were raised because the sole director also runs a company boasting " a proven track record of minimising liability for empty property rates". *D.Express, 22 Aug 2024.*

SECRET COMMONWEALTH

In its entries at Companies House, the UK's official register of businesses, Gofer Mining plc appears no different from most other prosperous extractive industry multinationals. They provide what look like well-presented accounts listing the company's multibillion dollar assets, financial transactions and exploration plans; Gofer claims to have 4,000 employees and a prestigious Canary Wharf HQ, with interests stretching from Tibet to Ukraine. However, they are not what they seem. While at first glance Gofer Mining appears to be a UK-based company, its documents say it is based in "The Union State of British Commonwealth", with one of its directors given as the "Duke of Commonwealth". The Union State of British Commonwealth has a website that explains that it is a completely separate and independent country, which has its own supreme court and a central bank that issues the "nation's" currency, the Commonwealth pound. It asserts that The Union State of British Commonwealth has a collection of citizens from countries including Britain, China and Russia, and that it has issued more than ten million passports; His Highness the Duke of Commonwealth leads the country and is said to be descended from the Greek royal family, as well as a Russian prince.

Gofer's accounts, though, are out of date, and former senior tax lawyer Dan Neidle says "Gofer Mining's accounts are on another level", adding that: "There's nothing in the accounts which is definitely an alarm bell, until you get to the auditor. Someone has faked an audit." The company accounts were audited and approved by a man named James Whitelaw, of whom no trace can be found outside this audit certificate, but who, it is claimed, works for a company called Smith Barclay LLP. This does exist, but seems closely connected to the Duke of Commonwealth himself, a man probably named Michail Roerich, a director of Gofer and its chief financial officer.

There is no evidence that Gofer has 4,000 employees, and its Canary Wharf HQ doesn't exist. However, Gofer is an active company; it spent years attempting to seize control of a Ukrainian gold mine, until blocked by Ukrainian courts in 2020. As part of the attempt, someone placed an advert in the *Times*, stating that that Gofer Mining had been formed by Barclays Bank, who would invest £250m in the mine, which Barclays firmly denies. The paper trail from this attempt reveals that Gofer are linked to a vast network of current, dormant or defunct companies that claim to have billions sitting on their balance sheets or tied up in shares, and all of which seem to be, at least to some degree, highly suspect. An example is the British Technology Bank, which claimed to have been part-owned by the Bank of England, who know nothing of the organisation. Various UK parliamentarians listed as close associates of Gofer also deny having heard of it.

When contacted about all this, Roerich explained that the company had been hijacked by criminals and attempted to back up this claim with documents from the "British Office for Ukraine", which describes itself as an "independent non-ministerial government department", although the UK Government denies there is any such organisation. In the face of such creativity, Companies House has announced it will "introduce compulsory identity verification checks for new and existing directors… and make creation of anonymous corporate structures that facilitate crime, corruption and fraud far more challenging", while Roerich has stated that he and his associates were "the victims, not the attackers", blaming the criminals for all the fraudulent activity. He has now started a legal action at the European Court of Human Rights against those who claim his company is fraudulent. *theguardian.com, 8 Feb 2025.*

GUARDIA CIVIL
Mº INTERIOR

GUARDIA CIVIL

ABOVE: Guardia Civil officers in Talavera de la Reina, Spain, discovered a van containing 90 bronze crucifixes stolen from cemeteries in Toledo province.

RED PAINT VANDALS

Residents of Chingford Road and Cazenove Road in Walthamstow, north London, were baffled and unsettled after houses in the streets were splashed with hard-to-remove red paint twice within a fortnight, and had the word "brothel" and what looked like phone numbers daubed on them. This seems not to be just a local incident; since mid-2023, houses across London, as well as in Huddersfield, Bradford and Reading, have been subjected to similar attacks. "We've no idea why we also ended up having paint all over the front of our house. It just doesn't add up," said one victim in Walthamstow.

The police have been unable either to track down the vandals or establish a motive for the attacks. In Reading, several houses were splashed with red and black paint, and again had "brothel" and numbers daubed on walls and windows; in Bradford there were two red paint attacks, although the vandals there managed to write "borthel" on the target properties. Various hypotheses have been suggested as to the motives behind the attacks, from local gang turf wars to protests against Israel, but it looks increasingly likely that the attacks are linked to Chinese loan sharks.

Oliver Chan, a criminologist at the University of Birmingham, said "red paint splashing" was a known tactic of loan sharks in China to remind the owners to pay their debts or to intimidate rivals. The suspicion was reinforced when CCTV caught masked men who spoke Mandarin with a north Chinese accent attacking a property in Acton, west London, hurling red paint and motor oil at it. Police, though, say: "At this stage there has been no arrest, and enquiries into the circumstances continue, including to establish if there is a link to other incidents outside the local and London areas." *theguardian.com, 20 Mar; dailymail.co.uk, 28 Mar 2025.* ”

TOMB RAIDERS

The Guardia Civil in Talavera de la Reina, Spain, arrested five people for robbery and two more for receiving stolen goods after swooping on a suspicious van. In it they found 90 bronze crucifixes stolen from the El Casar de Escalona cemetery. The gang had been specializing in raiding graves and were known to have made off with crucifixes from at least 19 cemeteries in Toledo province, which they were melting down for the value of the bronze. *theolivepress.es, 2 Jul 2024.*

SIDELINES

RETURN OF THE RING

The day before his 83rd birthday, Morgan Perigo got a surprise package. It contained his 1965 McMaster University graduation ring, sent to him from Barbados by diver Alex Davis. Perigo had lost the ring while on holiday there in 1977 and Davis had rediscovered it while metal detecting on an area of beach churned up by Hurricane Beryl. He then used the initials on the ring to track Perigo down via university records and reunite him with his lost possession after 47 years. *editions.cnn.com, 9 Nov 2024.*

PATHOLOGICAL SHYNESS

Mayur Tarapara, 32, turned up at a police station in Surat, India, claiming he had suddenly felt dizzy and passed out in the street, only to wake up 10 minutes later with four fingers missing from his left hand. Police initially thought his fingers might have been stolen for black magic rituals, but soon found massive holes in Tarapara's story. Pressed by police, he admitted he had cut off the fingers himself as he wanted to quit his job as a computer operator at a relative's company, but was too shy to resign, so had severed his fingers to make himself unfit for the post. *odditycentral.com, 31 Dec 2024.*

SHED AND BURIED

A couple from Cornwall named only as Ben and Rebecca were concerned about their dogs repeatedly disappearing into the hedge behind their new house, so trimmed it back. As they did so, they found a previously unsuspected extra building, a stone storage shed with a ladder and a roof completely overrun by ivy growth, and at the end, a "little door, a brick-built toilet and toilet roll holder still in place". "[We're] not sure yet if we'll make it into storage for the garden, a new outdoor toilet or shower, or someone even suggested we stick it on Airbnb," the couple said. *nypost.com, 7 Jan 2025.*

SKOOL'S OUT

New road markings outside a school in Cirencester, Gloucestershire, caused considerable comment. They read "Ceep Klear". *Sun, 7 Dec 2024.*

SIDELINES...

ICE PHONE

A bright pink iPhone ended up entombed in the ice on a temporary ice rink at Willen Lake, Milton Keynes, after a workman left the device, belonging to his daughter, on the rink's metal framework as 60,000 litres (13,000 gallons) of water were poured over it and frozen. Clearly visible through two inches of ice, the phone could be skated over and became a tourist attraction in its own right after being reported on news outlets worldwide and viewed more than 10 million times on TikTok. Amazingly, when it was finally retrieved after two months in the ice, it still worked. *BBC News, 9 Jan 2025.*

ZOO SURPRISE

A Dutch parachutist had a lucky escape when a jump over Rhenen went awry. Instead of landing where he intended, in the centre spot of a nearby football field, the parachutist drifted over Ouwehands Zoo and landed in the Bonobo enclosure. Fortunately, the Bonobos were inside at the time, but if he had gone a further 100m (328ft), he would have landed in the lion enclosure, which did have the lions in it. "It was really a shock," said zoo director Robin de Lange, adding: "This really must never happen again." *nos.nl, 11 Jan 2025.*

TOO MUCH MONKEY BUSINESS

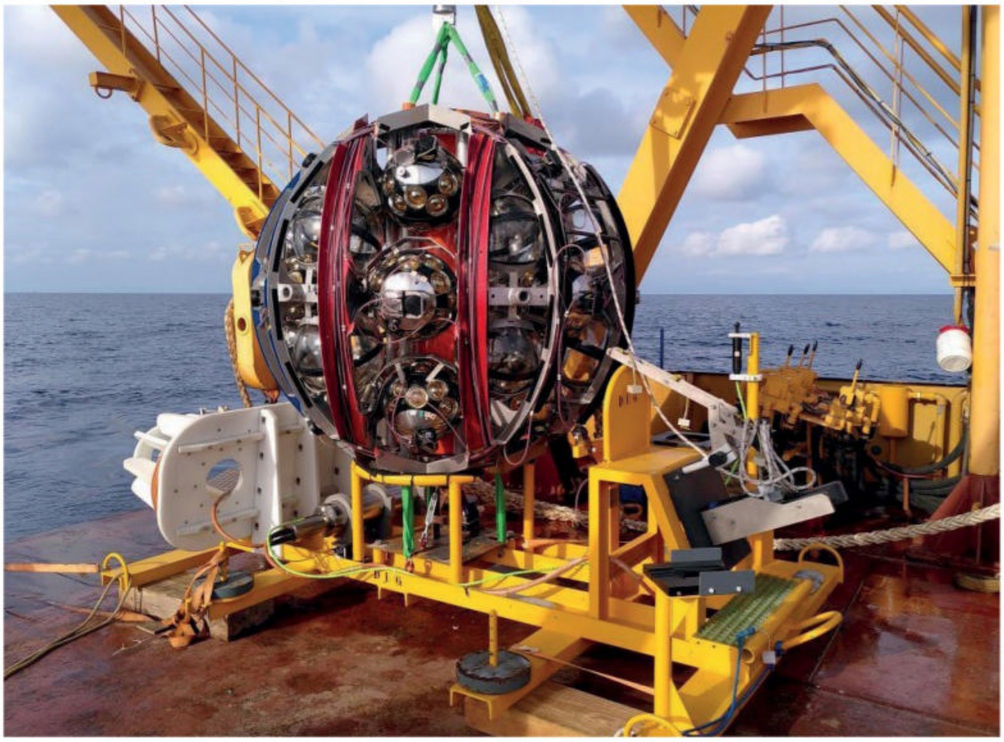
A visitor to the Trentham Monkey Forest, a popular primate-based visitor attraction in Staffordshire, gave the attraction a three-star review, complaining that "The park is pleasant, and the overall experience is decent. However, it primarily features monkeys, which makes the price too high in our opinion." To which baffled staff responded: "We're unsure how to answer this bit of feedback, sorry!" *S.Mercury, 25 Aug 2024.*

NEW ATTRACTION!
BIRDS + BUNN

MARTIN ROSS

NEWS FROM SPACE

All the latest oddities from rocketry and astronomy



KM3NET

ABOVE: A KM3NeT launching vehicle loaded with an ORCA type detection unit. **BELOW**: In a paper published in *Nature*, researchers reported the detection of an unusual neutrino that could provide evidence for dark matter.

HUMUNGOUS NEUTRINO

In a paper published in the journal *Nature* on 12 February, researchers from the snappily named Cubic Kilometre Neutrino Telescope (KM3NeT) reported the detection of an unprecedentedly energetic neutrino that took place in 2023. Neutrinos are a kind of subatomic particle that exist in vast numbers in cosmic rays. Every second, about 100 billion of them pass through each square centimetre of your body, but they rarely interact with other forms of matter. KM3NeT sits on the seabed, 2.2 miles (3.5km) beneath the Mediterranean, and has two components, one off the coast of France, and another 50 miles (80km) off Portopalo di Capo Passero, Sicily, where seawater helps shield its hundreds of detectors from other kinds of particle.

In 2023 a single particle slammed into the Sicilian branch of KMN3NeT and set off more than a third of its detectors, which, given that it is considered an event if even one detector is triggered, was surprising. Tracking its path, scientists concluded that the source was a neutrino from space that had vastly more energy than any ever detected before. This was estimated to be more than 100 petaelectronvolts (PeV), 25 times the energy to which particles can be accelerated in the Large Hadron Collider at its highest power, and physicists have struggled to come up with an explanation for where such an energetic particle could have originated. The leading contender is an evaporating black hole, and if so, this makes the discovery even more extraordinary. Stephen Hawking worked out that due to quantum interactions at a black hole's boundary, known as the event horizon, they emit a slow stream of what is now known as Hawking radiation, which gradually causes the black hole to evaporate, until it finally explodes in a blast of high energy particles like the one detected by KM3NeT.

The leading contender is an evaporating black hole

nature
COSMIC CATCHER
Deep sea telescope detects neutrino with highest energy ever recorded

However, for any black hole we know of, this process would take far longer than the age of the Universe, so it is unlikely that they are the source of the particle. It would need to be a truly tiny black hole, one with a mass of around 22,000lb (10,000kg), about the equivalent of two full grown ele-

SPACEX

ABOVE: Elon Musk's cherry-red Tesla Roadster, complete with a spacesuit-clad mannequin driver and a copy of *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* in the glove compartment, was launched into space in 2018

phants, but compressed to less than the size of an atom. These can only have been produced in the Big Bang, which would have flooded the Universe with what are known as "primordial" black holes, but these ought to have evaporated long ago.

Physicists have proposed a survival mechanism that would allow them to prolong their existence, though, meaning that they could be exploding relatively frequently even today. These tiny black holes are a leading contender for the mysterious dark matter that seems to make up much of the Universe, so this stupendously energetic neutrino could be the first solid evidence for dark matter, and if so KM3NeT, which is not yet fully complete, should see more of these high energy particles in the next few years, pointing to a potential solution to one of physics' biggest and most intractable mysteries. *livescience.com, 12 Feb, 11 Mar 2025*.

MORE MUSK TROUBLE

The International Astronomical Union's Minor Planet Center (MPC) is the organisation that keeps track of asteroids in close proximity to the Earth, and on 2 January it added a new object to the list of near-Earth asteroids. The object, which had been identified by an unnamed Turkish amateur astronomer who had combed through years of publicly available data, was given the name 2018 CN41.

Seventeen hours later, though, the astronomer realised he had made a mistake, and the MPC was forced to retract its announcement and remove 2018 CN41 from its register. The Turkish astronomer had belatedly realised that 2018 CN41 was not a rock: it was a cherry-red Tesla Roadster that once belonged to Elon Musk, and which he had sent into space along with its spacesuit-clad mannequin driver "Starman" as the test payload for the maiden launch of SpaceX's Falcon Heavy rocket in 2018. Musk had intended the car and its driver to head towards Mars and enter a stable orbit around the planet, but he got the trajectory wrong, and it overshot the target, ending up in a stable orbit around the Sun, which perhaps does not bode well for Musk's plan to send a crewed mission to the planet.

The car has now done around 4.5 trips around the Sun, travelling at roughly 45,000 mph (72,000 km/h), occasionally zooming past both Mars and the Earth, and is probably unrecognisable now after years of being blasted by solar radiation and small fragments of space rock. This is not the first time the MPC has mistaken human space debris for asteroids; previously a number of spacecraft have been misidentified, as well as various bits of rockets. *livescience.com, 30 Jan 2025*.

RUSSIAN REVOLUTION

While the rockets Musk and his SpaceX team are intending to send to Mars are likely to take around six months to complete their journey, Russian researchers from the space agency Rosatom have come up with a revolutionary new form of propulsion that could get a spacecraft there in 30 days.

Rather than using the traditional method of burning fuel to produce thrust, the Rosatom team have created a plasma accelerator that uses a magnetic field to force plasma particles out of the engine instead. That allows the engine to get round the limitations of matter flow that constrain the thrust of combustion powered rockets, enabling a vehicle powered by the new engine to reach much higher speeds. Also, as the plasma does not need to be strongly heated, the engine does not need to be cooled, and because there is no wastage as heat, almost all the energy put into the motor is turned into thrust. Rosatom has a fully functional lab prototype ready for testing, and the agency has announced it expects to have a flight model ready by 2030.

If successful, the engine could have a significant impact on space travel, not only making it faster and more efficient, but also safer, as faster trips limit astronaut exposure to dangerous cosmic radiation. *interestingengineering.com, 10 Feb 2025*.

SIDELINES...

SUB-TERFUGE

Police in Australia attempting to combat the flood of drugs smuggled into the country by the Italian Mafia, South American cartels and outlaw biker gangs have discovered a bizarre new ruse. While the criminals have long used DIY submarines to avoid detection, they are now taking it one step further and disguising the subs as ultra-realistic whales and other sea creatures. An official source described the fake whales as being able to carry a "shitload" of cocaine and fentanyl, and said they were believed to be dropped overboard from smugglers' ships in international waters to complete the journey to Australia. *S.Telegraph (Queensland) 5 Jan 2025.*

LOST IN TRANSLATION

The Football Association of Ireland had to issue an apology to the Latvian Under 21 team following a game against the Ireland Under 21s. The match programme was published with errors in the names of several Latvian team members: Bruno Melnis was credited as "Bruno the Black", while Gleb Patika came out as "Gleb Liked It" and Dario Sits ended up as "Dario Shit". *Irish Times, 16 Sept 2024.*

OWN GOAL

The recently opened fire station in Stadtallendorf, Germany, was devastated by a fire that destroyed the equipment hall and almost a dozen emergency vehicles, causing millions of euros' worth of damage. The building did not have a fire alarm system and by the time the firefighters became aware there was a blaze it was already destroying the equipment needed to extinguish it. *<i>, 18 Oct 2024.*

A SLICE OF THE PIE

The charity Diabetes UK has finally been able to claim the legacy left to it by Malcolm Chenery, who died in 2021. He had bequeathed them a house, jewellery, cash and a large collection of ornaments, but had written his will on two pieces of cardboard packaging, one from Youngs Frozen Fish and the other from Mr Kipling's Mince Pies. Although one piece had the required witness signatures that made it a valid will, there was doubt that the other could be counted as part of it. A court ruled that similarities between the two sections meant it could be considered one will, allowing the charity to inherit. *Guardian, 14 Nov 2024.*

SIDELINES...

CALIFORNIA DREAMING

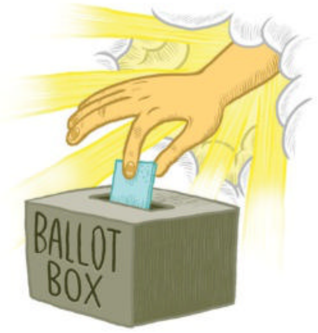
It took until 2024 for the local authority in Southwark, London, to realise that a road sign put up in 2010 had been instructing drivers to get in lane for Malibu or Laurel Canyon, 5,500 miles (8,850km) away in California, rather than nearby Rotherhithe and Peckham. Many locals had not noticed it; those who had assumed it was a prank or art, so did not report it. It remains unclear who was responsible for the optimistic signage and why it took so long for the Council to spot, but it has now been corrected. *Metro, 12 Nov 2024.*

COMPLETELY DENTAL

The fractious relationship between Daniel Fock Ming Chai, 28, and his older brother came to a head in their shared Singapore flat when the older man left dental floss on Chai's toothbrush and turned off the Wi-Fi. Chai responded by using an improvised flamethrower to set fire to his brother's bedroom door, then attacked him with an axe as he came out. The 32-year-old suffered injuries to his hand and forearm leading to Chai being arrested and given 14 months in jail on charges of voluntarily causing hurt with a dangerous weapon and mischief by fire. *straitstimes.com, 19 Sept 2024.*

DIVINE INTERVENTION

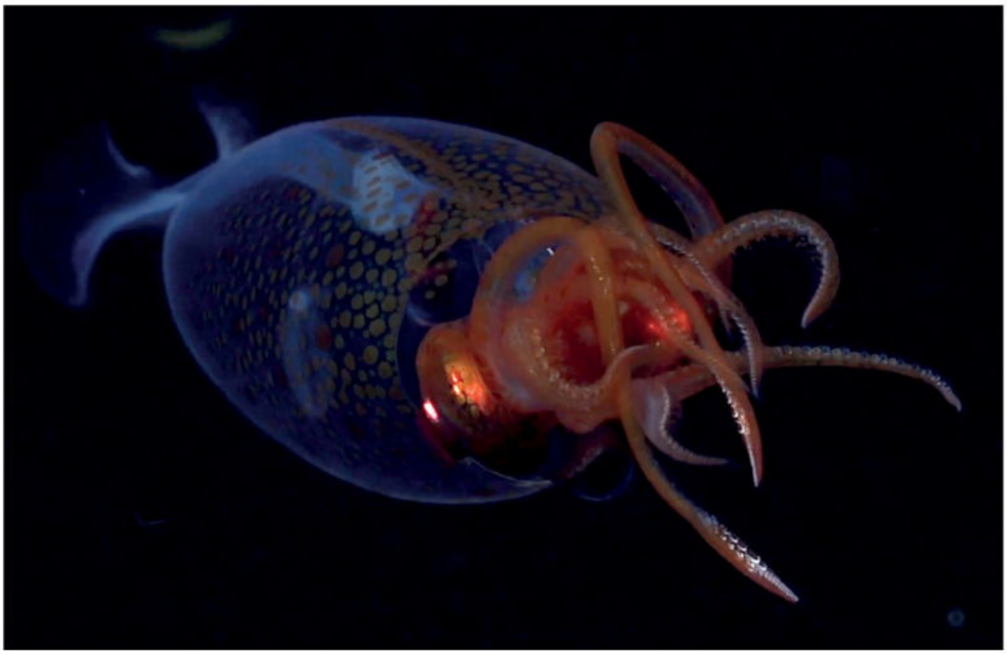
During recent Irish elections, several "Miraculous Medals" were found in the ballot boxes at the Cavan-Monaghan count. Initially two silver ones were discovered among ballot papers for the Monaghan area, and later three bronze ones were found in boxes being counted at the Cavan Leisure Centre. All featured invocations to Our Lady, the Virgin Mary. Journalist Sean McMahon said it was the first occurrence of its kind he'd seen in 40 years of covering elections. "Maybe they thought a wee bit of religion would direct the vote in the right direction," he said. *Irish Times, 2 Dec 2024.*



MARTIN ROSS

COLOSSAL SQUID

The elusive cephalopod is finally caught live on film – and it's a baby



SCHMIDT OCEAN INSTITUTE

The colossal squid (*Mesonychoteuthis hamiltoni*) is the world's largest cephalopod species. Growing up to 7m (23ft) in length, they can weigh 500kg (1,100lb), making them the heaviest invertebrate known to science. Giant squid can grow to twice the length, but as much of that is tentacle, they only weigh half as much. Until now, the colossal squid has only been known through fragmentary remains in whale and seabird stomachs; no live ones have been seen, and very few intact specimens, although the occasional colossal squid has washed up on beaches, and these have sometimes been witnessed in their death throes. In 2022, the lack of sightings of live specimens led the Natural History Museum to say that "even to this day, the enormous invertebrates still straddle the line between legend and reality".

Now, an international team of scientists and crew on board Schmidt Ocean Institute's research vessel *Falkor* has made the colossal squid a bit more real, filming a live specimen in its natural habitat at a depth of 600m (1,968ft), near the South Sandwich Islands in the south Atlantic, 100 years after the species was first scientifically identified and named. This particular colossal squid was not particularly colossal, being a transparent 30cm-long (11.8in) juvenile, filmed using a remote operated vehicle (ROV). Juveniles of the species are transparent, but they become opaque as they grow larger. "These unforgettable moments continue to remind us that the ocean is brimming with mysteries yet to be solved," said the team's chief scientist Dr Michelle Taylor. *BBC News, iflscience.com, 16 Apr 2025.*

THE CONSPIRASPHERE

The death of Virginia Giuffre in April may have been the final act in a long-running saga of exploitation and abuse, but, says **NOEL ROONEY**, that doesn't mean the story is over...

DEATH IS NOT THE END

The Conspirasphere owes Virginia Giuffre an elegy. Her death, on 25 April, in Western Australia, excited the media, briefly; but somehow, as happened throughout her short, traumatic life, the story wasn't really about her. Somewhere between the year 2000, when she was first 'recruited' by Ghislaine Maxwell, and her untimely death, Giuffre had become a transparency, a lens through which to glimpse, obliquely, the shadowy actions of people rather more famous; deservedly more famous, perhaps, according to the media's warped meritocracy.

Her last days were as confused and confusing as her early life. On 31 March, she was allegedly involved in a traffic accident; 'allegedly' because the only comprehensive account of it was her own. The police acknowledged that an accident took place, but were otherwise not forthcoming. She appeared to suffer at least minor injuries in the incident, and a few days later she posted that she had been given four days to live due to renal failure.

And then came the news that, in the midst of a divorce custody battle with her estranged Australian husband, she had taken her own life. There are currently no details of how she killed herself, and that, naturally, has excited suspicion and speculation in the C-sphere; that, and a series of posts she made in 2019 that one might describe as a Macafee message, claiming she had no intention of suicide, so if anything happened to her it was murder.

One can, I think, forgive the conspiracists for having a bee in their collective bonnet; there is an air of unreality – or better of not quite reality – about the whole story, and particularly the last, unfortunate chapters. Giuffre 'said' she had been in an accident and sustained serious injuries; she said she had been given four days to live; she said she would never kill herself and then she did. That leaves a lot of space for a question foundational to conspiracy thinking: what really happened?

I have seen forum posts suggesting that she was a fantasist or, minimally more kindly, that the traumas she had endured turned her into a fantasist. There may even be a germ of truth in those claims. However, this is a risky tack for a conspiracist to take; it could all too easily lead to exonerating those people – Epstein and Maxwell, of course, but so many others – who brought her to the point where her life took on a meaning that wasn't always consonant with empirical reality.

NEWSCOM / ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

Giuffre posted that she had been given four days to live

Giuffre's death has reanimated interest in the origins of her story too. Sexually abused as a child, she spent some time estranged from her family, living on the streets and regularly sexually exploited. When she was reconciled with her family, her father was working at a coastal resort in Florida; Mar-a-Lago, the playground of one Donald Trump. It was there that she was first approached by Maxwell and, eventually, moulded into an elite adolescent plaything for the jaded rich.

Consequently, there is a motif in some of the commentary on her death that wants to implicate the Orange One more deeply in her life and ultimate fate. This is less a sympathy vote for Giuffre and more a reaction from disappointed MAGA activists at the inevitable betrayal of their aspirations now the Donald is in power. But it joins dots, and that's what counts in the C-sphere.

As for the largely insipid response of the legacy media, it hardly requires a tin foil hat to suspect that some people are being protected from the unflattering limelight such a story might cast. Epstein, being dead (and dead in similarly murky circumstances, it could be said) is clearly fair game. Maxwell, languishing in prison, is similarly so. The media attitude to princes is more ambivalent, as it is to the long list of now ageing celebrities that might be implicated. In any case, that elegy, I fear, may be a long time coming.

While the mainstream media (and the C-sphere to some extent) has focused on the recent – and still partial – JFK/RFK disclosures, a few nuggets have emerged around other events. A forgotten detail from the OKC bombing was a particularly fascinating reminder of how highly strange that event was. About 30 minutes before a bomb destroyed the Murrah building, an anonymous phone call was received by OKC police saying that a bomb had already exploded there.

This story (along with reports of other explosive devices, of bomb disposal operatives turning up before the blast occurred, and of ghostly Jihadis lurking at or near the scene) was quickly forgotten at the time. But the declassified documents make it clear that the warning, or claim of responsibility, was real. In normal circumstances, one might have expected this phone call to be investigated; after all, it could have provided evidence of a conspiracy. The fact that it wasn't is taken by some as proof that it was, in fact, evidence of a cover-up.

John Ashcroft, later to find fame as Attorney General under George W Bush, and a chief architect of the Patriot Act, is implicated in this story too. According to Terry Nichols, the alleged accomplice of Timothy McVeigh, Ashcroft approached him and offered to commute his death sentence if he would claim responsibility for the phone call. Nichols refused and the story would have died except for the heroic efforts of lawyer Jessie Trentadue, whose brother died in mysterious – and connected – circumstances. Kenneth Trentadue's death was ruled a suicide too, despite his body being covered in injuries.

Death, it seems, by any means, is not the closure one might expect. For Virginia Giuffre, and too many others, sadly, the show must and will go on.

www.thetruthseeker.co.uk/?p=307477 ; https://thepeoplesvoice.tv/she-didnt-kill-herself-gop-lawmakers-break-silence-on-virginia-giuffres-death/; www.zerohedge.com/political/okc-anniversary-bush-era-swamp-creature-revealed-be-key-figure-bombing-coverup

ARCHÆOLOGY A MONTHLY EXCAVATION OF ODDITIES AND ANTIQUITIES

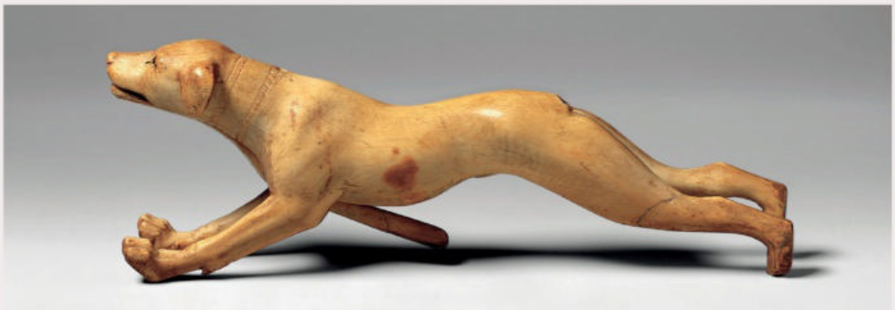
PAUL DEVEREUX considers Bronze Age street food, Ancient Egyptian dogs and a very old face

MILLION-YEAR-OLD FACE

In 2022, palæoanthropologists found the fossilised bone fragments of the left side of a human face well over one million years old, along with stone age tools, at the Sima del Elefante cave in Sierra de Atapuerca, Spain. The extremely ancient owner of the facial fragments has been nicknamed "Pink" by researchers. A subsequent study, using both traditional conservation techniques and advanced 3D imaging and analysis tools to reconstruct the pieces, has resulted in what is more accurately described as a hominin face because, as a key researcher in the study, Dr Martinón-Torres, Anthropology Honorary Professor and Director of The Center for Research on Human Evolution (CENIEH), explains: "The evidence is still insufficient for a definitive classification, which is why it has been assigned to *H. aff. erectus*. This designation acknowledges Pink's affinities with *Homo erectus* while leaving open the possibility that it may belong to another species." She adds that their discovery "proves that at least two different species of human populated western Europe during the Pleistocene era and it provides fascinating insight into the evolution of the genus Homo." That leaves we *Homo erectus* types rather in the dark as to our actual ancestry, it seems. *University College London, 12 Mar 2025. Also in Nature 12 Mar 2025: DOI https://doi.org/10.1038/s41586-025-08681-0*

BRONZE AGE FAST FOOD

No, fast food is not just a modern invention. In 2023, archæologists discovered a Minoan street food stall 3,600 years old, in the ruins of Akrotiri, on the southern end of the volcanic island of Santorini – the ancient Thera. It had close links with the highly developed Cretan Minoan civilisation, the major culture of its time in the Aegean, and was buried under many feet of ash from the mighty Theran volcanic eruption in the 16th century BC. Unlike Pompei, its inhabitants seemingly all escaped, but the ash preserved two-story buildings, artefacts, streets, room furnishings, among many other details, including remarkable and beautiful murals. The Akrotiri fast-food stall, a type known as a 'thermopolion', "a shop selling warm (food)", had painted menus showing the food being sold, and we are pretty sure that would have included the ever-popular perennial Greek dish of souvlaki, because Bronze Age souvlaki skewers and plates have been found. *Greek Reporter, 4 April 2025.*



METROPOLITAN MUSEUM, NEW YORK

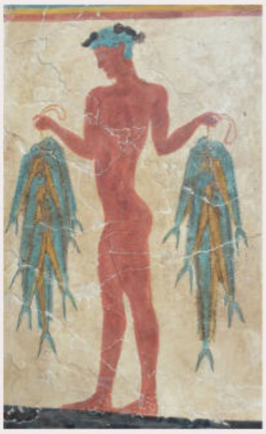
RT44 / CREATIVE COMMONS

TOP: Howard Carter discovered this carved ivory mechanical dog from ancient Egypt. **ABOVE**: General view of the major ongoing archæological site of Akrotiri, Santorini. **BELOW**: A Bronze Age mural from an Akrotiri house.

CLEVER DOG

An exquisitely carved ivory dog, just over seven inches long, and depicted as leaping, was found in the personal collection of Howard Carter, he of the discovery of King Tutankhamun's tomb, and now at the Metropolitan Museum, New York. The carved animal has incised lines around its neck indicating a collar and thus showing it to represent domestication. It is unclear exactly where the carving was found, but the Met suggests it may have been from an elite tomb sometime during the reign of Amenhotep III (14th century BC) – King Tut's grandfather.

The notable thing about the artefact is that it has a lever underneath its chest, which, if pulled, makes the dog's jaw move as if barking and revealing teeth and red tongue. It wasn't a bird or a plane, but was it a toy or that beloved item of archæologists, a ritual object? *Live Science, 17 Mar 2025.*



PAUL DEVEREUXYORK

BEFORE STONEHENGE?

We have mentioned previously in this column the fact that Max Gate, the former home of the famous novelist and poet Thomas Hardy (*Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, *Far From the Madding Crowd*, and so forth) was built partially over the site of an embanked circular megalithic monument 100 metres across (see **FT453:12**). Now a scheduled monument named Flagstones, it was discovered in the 1980s, when four burials were found interred there in pits, and a young adult beneath a fallen central sarsen stone. A new study and analysis has dated its first phase to about 3,200 BC (after earlier Neolithic activity). The significance of this is that it places it a couple of centuries before the similarly designed early phase of Stonehenge (2,900 BC). Could this mean that Stonehenge needs re-dating, or was Flagstones a prototype of the much more famous monument? *Original paper in Antiquity, 6 Mar 2025. DOI: https://doi.org/10.15184/aqy.2025.28*

CLASSICAL CORNER

FORTEANA FROM THE ANCIENT WORLD COMPILED BY BARRY BALDWIN

310: PAPA DON'T PREACH

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Bit of a change here. Never done a Paschal piece before. But the coincidence of Easter and Pope Francis's death was an irresistible lure. Perhaps also egged-on by this year's Easter Bunny offerings.

"They were accomplished girls in our kitchen, they spoke Latin fluently, which awed us a good deal. But then we picked up a little Latin ourself, learning that some Latin words are much like some English words." Fort, *Many Parts*, autobiographical fragments edited by 'X', online, ch1 para16.

I have wondered before in these columns just where these classically-fluent scullions came from? Given Fort's quite correct remark about Latin-English verbal coordinations, this does not seem to be a joke. Nothing about this puzzle in Steinmeyer's biography.

Francis Latinised his name to 'Franciscus' for his tomb. He certainly knew the language from his traditional Catholic education. However, he discouraged use of the old Latin-speaking Tridentine Mass, and disqualified Latin as the official language at Vatican synods. This was a marked contrast with predecessor Benedict XVI (significant choice of name) who established a new educational office in the Vatican to promote the use of Latin within and beyond the Church.

At least Francis was the first LATIN-American Pope.

Note here *en passant* the journal *Latinitas*, established in 2013 by the Pontifica Academia Latinitatis, published twice-yearly by an international committee – past issues available online.

Most Christian scholars do not think Jesus knew Latin, except of course in Mel Gibson's picture *The Passion of the Christ* (2004). Seems to me he could well have picked up some handy odd words and phrases, living as he did in a Roman province. Same situation with Greek, though the famous pun about Peter being the Petra (Rock) on which the Church would be founded may argue for a fair degree of competence. His natural language for conversation and preaching was Aramaic. Which tongue was used in his interview with Pontius Pilate ('Got into the New Testament by accident'– Bertholt Brecht)? Had the Roman governor garnered some Aramaic during his tenure? Or do we simply assume the presence of a translator?

Pope Francis disqualified Latin as the official language at Vatican synods

(Some might think the Son of God should have been, in *Star Trek* lingo, the Universal Translator.)

One person not wearing a red hat or giving interviews on television is Octogenarian Father Reginald Foster. For what here follows, I am much indebted to Katie Walker's piece on him in *The Oldie* (21 April 2025), also available as a blog.

Foster has been Latin Teacher to four Popes. According to Walker, his first job for Paul VI was to pen a note of congratulation to Idi Amin in 1969: For what? Unknown. I'd give much to see that note, much more to see the reaction of *The Last King of Scotland.* There is an online photograph of Paul shaking hands with Idi in 1975: the mind boggles…

Walker provides several examples of Foster's neo-Latin coinages: *Tumultuario* ('Deafening Noise') for Rock 'n Roll – musical bias showing here; *Breviloquentia* ('Terse Speech') for Twitter; *Bubula hamburgiensis cepulis condita* ('Hamburger with Onions').

No doubt Foster makes good use of the 728-page *Lexicon Recentis Latinitatis* issued by the Vatican in 2003. Outside home territory it received a dusty reception. Canadian classicist Anthony Barrett sniffed (*National Post*, 15 May 2003), "It is an interesting intellectual exercise, but I would say it is of no practical value," while Toronto's Jack Chambers, asked if it would spark a Latin renaissance, scoffed, "Not a hope in Hell."

In Hell, perhaps not. As to Heaven, well, Epicurus was sure his gods spoke Greek. There must have been Romans, changing Zeus to Jupiter, who would have said Latin.

Far from being without hope or interest, the Lexicon is a welcome "backstop to such Latin-tinged books as F*elicitas est Canis Parvenus Caldus* ("Happiness is a Warm Puppy") – a collection of Peanuts' Snoopy cartoons. Winnie the Pooh was similarly Latinised.

Moving briefly to home turf, in 1997 Sunderland FC inaugurated their new stadium with the motto *Consectatio Excellentiæ* (Pursuit of Excellence). A local classics don sneered at this phrase, but as I showed in a letter to the *Sunday Times*, this vocabulary is authentically Ciceronian.

A shame that Sunderland were relegated the same season.

A piece of Vatican Latin that earned especial scorn was its suggested translation of 'Motor Cycle': *Birota ignifero latice propulsa* ('A Two-wheeler propelled by fire-providing juice'). A bit florid, I grant you, but it passes the clarity test, and the adjective *ignifero* is a neat bow towards classical Latin poetry where it chiefly occurs. Classical critics should get off their high horses. After all, how would THEY Latinise 'Motor Bike'?

Jack Chambers was sadly right in discounting a Latin renaissance sparked by the Vatican Lexicon. We are not likely to see youths demanding to be taught Greek and Latin as in Anthony Burgess's novel *1985* (1978). Still, there have been straws in the wind, for example reports of rising enrolments for Latin in American high schools.

If you believe Ezra Pound, this might be dangerous, given his dictum "The thought of what America would be like if the Classics had a wide circulation keeps me awake at night."

Memory and forgetting

DAVID HAMBLING brings good news and bad news from the latest memory research

Memory is unreliable. This is a major issue when researching unexplained phenomena which are, all too often, recorded only in the memories of eyewitnesses. Researchers have been aware of some of the problems with memory for decades, but recent research, and new technology, are complicating matters further. This column discussed the topic of shifting memories way back in **FT243:14**, but research has moved on. It now seems that human mental capacity is more about our power to forget than our power to remember.

From 2012, Donna Bridge of Northwestern University carried out studies involving location-recall, with subjects tasked with remembering where objects were placed on a grid. Her work confirmed that every time the memory is recalled, it can change. Even if subjects were only tested twice on locations there was a noticeable effect.

"Retrieving the memory didn't simply reinforce the original association. Rather, it altered memory storage to reinforce the location that was recalled at session two," Bridge told *Northwestern Now*.

The more times the memory was recalled, the greater the drift. This 'retrieval-induced distortion' effect has made Bridge decidedly sceptical about witness reports.

"When someone tells me they are sure they remember exactly the way something happened, I just laugh," she says.

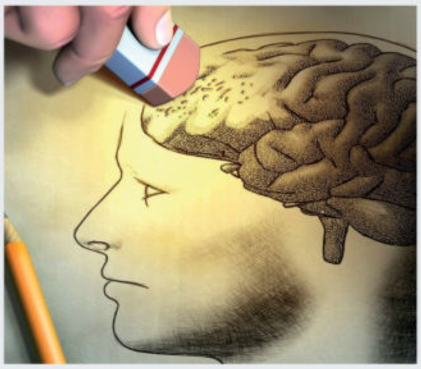
This applies especially to memories recalled many times, the sort which are retold as anecdotes. The memory diverges increasingly from the original as more distortions creep in. This is likely to apply to ghost stories and other encounters that a witness is forced to retell over and over.

Even without conscious recall, the brain reorganises and alters memories. Recall occurs in a jumbled form in dreams, and a 'consolidation' alters memories.

Faced with this distortion, the best thing to do is for the witness to write down what they saw as soon as possible. This too affects memory, as has long been observed.

"If you wish to forget anything on the spot, make a note that this thing is to be remembered," advised Edgar Allen Poe in his 1844 *Marginalia*.

This is not the same as note-taking during study, which has been shown to improve memory by encouraging active listening and focus on the topic being discussed. Taking notes after an event appears to do the opposite.



Natural forgetting is part of a process of generalising to prevent us becoming too fixated on certain experiences

Researchers at the University of California have been studying this effect since 2018, and in particular the finding that photographing an object makes it more difficult to recall than just looking at it. The researchers were quick to note the irony that when we take a picture to preserve a moment in time, the act of doing so may have exactly the opposite effect.

The 'Photo-taking impairment effect' is now well established and has been validated by multiple studies showing it also applies to things like computer screenshots. The best explanation is that there is a form of 'cognitive offloading' taking place. The human brain is essentially lazy, or rather efficient at delegating unnecessary work. If something is stored elsewhere, the brain is more likely to discard it as unnecessary.

A similar form of technologically-enabled amnesia has been documented under the name of 'the Google effect.' Named in 2011 after a paper in *Science* by Prof Betsy Sparrow of Columbia University, this refers to the finding that, when people expect to have future access to information, they have lower rates of recall of the information itself and enhanced recall instead of where to access it. The suggestion is that the Internet is now a primary form of external collective memory and that the memory storage in our brains has atrophied as a result. Increasingly, we are losing the habit of having to remember things.

This tendency to forget now looks more like a feature than a bug. Recent research led by Tomas Ryan at Trinity College, Dublin, suggests that natural forgetting, as opposed to the pathological forgetting from dementia or other causes, is simply part of how the brain normally works.

The Trinity team believe natural forgetting is part of a process of generalising to prevent us from becoming too fixated on certain experiences. Rather than storing the details of every individual dog you have ever encountered, your brain gradually merges them all together into one vaguer and more generalised idea of 'dog'. This makes it easier to recognise the next dog than having to compare it with dozens of specific examples.

"Education is what is left when you have forgotten all you have ever learned," sums this up, an observation dating back to at least 1907 – but which is likely much older, because, appropriately enough, the name of the originator has been forgotten even though the idea remains.

The Trinity team believe natural forgetting is beneficial and helps us adapt to a changing environment. They describe it as 'plasticity' in the neurons involved in memory which are known as 'engram cells'.

In some forms of amnesia the engram may be destroyed, but this is not generally the case.

"We hypothesize that natural forgetting represents a reversible suppression of engram ensembles due to experience and perceptual feedback, prompting cellular plasticity processes that modulate memory access adaptively," according to a 2024 paper.

The magic word here is 'reversible.' The memory is still there but access to it has been lost. The team carried out experiments with mice, using an implanted fibre optic device to stimulate specific brain cells. This technique, known as optogenetic stimulation, successfully restored memories of learned behaviour which had previously been forgotten.

In theory, all memories might be recoverable.

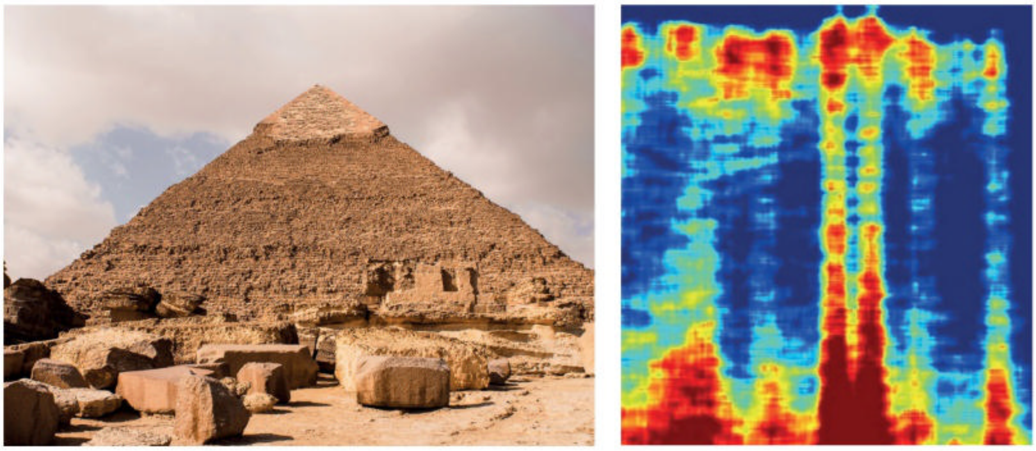
In summary, memory research has bad news and good news. The bad news is that our memories are even more unreliably shifting sands than we thought. The good news is that one day we may be able to recover original memories accurately. That may be many decades away though – by which time we may have forgotten what we were looking for.

PYRAMID REVELATIONS?

Reseachers claim the Pyramid of Khafre was built on the remains of a far older underground city

In March, a team of researchers led by Corrado Malanga from the University of Pisa in Italy, Filippo Biondi from the University of Strathclyde and independent Egyptologist Armando Mei held a press conference to announce what they believe is a stunning discovery beneath the Pyramid of Khafre, one of the three great pyramids at Giza. The researchers used radar pulses beamed from satellites to probe the ground beneath the pyramid, then converted these to soundwaves to create 3D images of what was within the rock of the Giza plateau. This created a process that was analogous to using sonar to detect objects underwater, but works through solid rock.

Malanga and his colleagues interpreted the results of their image processing as showing eight massive wells beneath Khafre's pyramid, each between 33 and 39 feet (10 to 12m) in diameter, going down at least 2,130 feet (650m), with spiral staircases round the inside. At the bottom, they see four huge rectangular enclosures, about 260 feet (79m) on each side, with each enclosure having another four shafts extending even deeper into the earth. The team also said a water system had been identified beneath the pyramid platform, more than 2,100 feet (640m) below ground level. In addition, they believe there is "an entire hidden world of many structures" further down, at around 4,000 feet (1,220m). Malanga and his colleagues went on to say that in the future they intend to magnify the images and that this "will reveal that beneath it lies what can only be described as a true underground city," adding that "the Pyramid of Khafre might conceal undiscovered secrets, notably the fabled Hall of Records."



MSTYSLAV CHERNOV / CREATIVE COMMONS

CORRADO MALANGA

ABOVE LEFT: The Pyramid of Khafre on the Giza Plateau. **ABOVE RIGHT**: The researchers used radar pulses to probe beneath the pyramid before converting them to soundwaves and creating 3D images – but what do they show?

The team were prompted to carry out the research after poring over ancient texts. They studied the Egyptian Book of the Dead, specifically chapter 149, which describes the 14 dwellings of the divine, and also the Turn King List, an ancient Egyptian document that features the name of kings, gods and demigods who supposedly ruled Egypt before the first recorded dynasties. These, they believe, "provide a whole series of references that a pre-existing civilisation lived in the region before 'a cataclysmic event'" and built an underground complex about 38,000 years ago. The team believe the "cataclysmic event" was a massive asteroid strike that caused global climate change and extinctions in relatively recent times, when humans already existed. Traces in ancient ice cores have been interpreted as indicating such an event, but the lack of an impact crater and other supporting evidence has meant this has largely been dismissed by science.

The discoveries claimed by Malanga, Biondi and Mei have met with a degree of scepticism from both Egyptologists and radar specialists, not least because the results were announced at a press conference without the support of any publications that would enable detailed scrutiny of their methods and findings. Several glaring problems have been pinpointed; Professor Lawrence Conyers, an archæological radar specialist at the University of Denver, said that it was not possible for the technology to penetrate that deeply into the ground, so the idea of an underground city is "a huge exaggeration". He added that while the techniques used to gather the data were legitimate, the researchers "are using all kinds of fancy proprietary data analysis software" about which he could not comment as no details of this had been published. He also said that an advanced civilisation building a vast underground complex 38,000 years ago was unlikely, as all other evidence points to cities only developing around 9,000 years ago, adding: "There were a few large villages before that but those only go back a few thousand years from that time." Leading Egyptologist Dr Zahi Hawass, Egypt's former minister of antiquities, was even more dismissive, saying the entire study was "completely wrong" and lacked any scientific basis.

> *"Beneath it lies what can only be described as an underground city"*

Others have been concerned that Malanga and colleagues refer several times to Khafre's pyramid being made of granite, whereas it is constructed from limestone, and that they talk of the hollow vertical shafts "supporting the pyramid", which is not the usual function of voids; also, they seem to think the pyramid was built on the sand, not the plateau bedrock, as is actually the case. In addition, the dimensions of the structures they claim to have found are truly vast, many times the height of the pyramid itself, which is not reflected in their diagrams, and it is difficult to resolve the details of the claimed structures in the images the team have made public. There is also the problem that the "city" would seem to be well below the water table of the Giza plateau.

The research team, though, are supremely confident in their findings, and see no need to publish them academically or have them confirmed by independent research, announcing at the press conference: "This research does not have to be proven; we don't have to wait for other types of work or other scientists who can declare it true, because these are photographs: I photograph the Tower of Pisa and it is not that I need 500 other people to photograph the Tower of Pisa to say 'There is a Tower of Pisa'. This research already as it is, foresees that this data is real, but what does that mean? It means that someone built something at 1,200m (4,000ft) depth… History seems to me to have to be rewritten." *telegraph.co.uk, 23 Mar; dailymail.co.uk, 25 Mar; dailygrail.com, 26 Mar 2025.*

Put that light out!

ALAN MURDIE explores the world of lucid dreams and Near Death Experiences

THE DREAM MACHINE
Lucid dreams and how to control them
Dr KEITH HEARNE

ABOVE: Dr Keith Hearne, pictured with his 'dream machine', conducted the first sleep-laboratory studies into lucid dreams at the University of Hull in 1975. He went on to publish numerous books on the subject of lucid dreaming, starting with *The Dream Machine: Lucid Dreams and How to Control Them* in 1990.

The 12th of April 1975 may not be a date instantly recognisable as a turning point in scientific history. In the wider world, the USA pulled out of Cambodia, singer and dancer Josephine Baker passed away in Paris and the previous night in the UK the second episode of *The Good Life* had just aired on BBC1.

But at 8am that April morning something truly remarkable occurred in a sleep laboratory at the University of Hull and in the mind of a male volunteer participating in an experiment with lucid dreaming. Psychologist Keith Hearne looked on in amazement as a machine recording the subject's rapid eye movements (REM) suddenly displayed a zig-zag burst of activity on the recording chart. The dreaming subject was suddenly moving his eyes in accordance with a pre-arranged sequence to alert observers that a state of self-consciousness was being achieved in his dream state. Whilst wired to a multi-channel recorder he became aware he was actually dreaming and was now moving his eyes to let Hearne know.

In interviews in 2014, Keith Hearne recalled the moment as "absolutely astounding" comparable to "getting SETI signals from another solar system." He recalled, "I was ecstatic, but had to keep quiet not to awaken the subject!" (Rebecca Casale, *World of Lucid Dreaming* website, www.world-of-lucid-dreaming.com/keith-hearne-interview.html)

People talk in their sleep or even carry out complex actions, and mediums can produce whole books in trances

"I was looking at a communication from a person in another room who was asleep, 'unconscious', dreaming, yet in his own vivid world in which he was perfectly conscious and interacting with others. It was his reality – I was in my reality. A channel of communication had been established between those two realities."

Alert to synchronicities, Hearne noted it was exactly 14 years since Yuri Gagarin had become the first man in space; here he felt he had experimentally confirmed the first contact with inner space with communication between two modes of consciousness – waking and dreaming.

Now in some respects, Hearne's experimental confirmation of consciousness on some level within sleep is not a surprise. After all, people talk in their sleep or even carry out complex actions, and mediums can produce whole books in trances.

Justly, his original lucid dream signals chart-record from that day and 'dream machine' are preserved at the Science Museum (will any ghost hunting equipment ever get there I wonder?)

Later hailed as International Lucid Dreaming Day, that momentous 12 April launched Keith Hearne into a PhD and a career spanning nearly half a century, exploring dreams, altered states of consciousness, hypnosis and premonitions.

The year 1975 also saw Raymond Moody's best-selling book *Life After Life*, detailing numerous examples of cases of near-death experiences (NDEs) on the part of people undergoing cardiac arrest or who qualify as clinically dead until revived. Returning from the point of death, they recall seeing a light, or apparently perceive a post-mortem form of existence, including encounters with deceased loved ones and religious figures.

Investigation into these phenomena by researchers aspiring to find explanations has continued ever since and remains controversial. As with mystical states, it is hard even to define clear categories or the boundaries separating them. (See *Lucid Dreams* (1968) by Celia Green.)

Is the sense of self experienced by a lucid dreamer the same 'I' or centre of consciousness that looks down upon its physical form in an out of the body experience, or the same 'I' that appears to glimpse a possible afterlife? And how does all this relate to apparitions of living people, the spontaneous appearances of doubles or doppelgängers reported in psychical research? And what of the people whom both dreamers and those undergoing Near Death Experiences recall encountering? Such scientific and philosophical problems can arrive wholly unexpectedly and tax even the most formidable of philosophers.

In May 1988 Britain's most distinguished philosopher, AJ Ayer, a committed materialist and atheist, was recovering in hospital from a bout of pneumonia. Gulping down a morsel of smoked salmon he choked and suffered a cardiac arrest. Fortunately, he was revived some minutes later, but while his heart had ceased to beat, he had experienced a remarkable dream or vision.

He first saw a bright and painful red light, which he took to be responsible for controlling the Universe, and two external entities charged with governing space-time. Unfortunately, these ministers of space were failing in maintaining the cosmos, which was becoming warped and out of joint, resembling "a badly fitted jigsaw puzzle". The result was that the laws of nature were breaking down. Ayer resolved to help out. Recalling Einstein's general theory of relativity, where space and time are treated as a unity, he realised their problems might be solvable by influencing time. He tried communicating this to the guardians of space-time by waving his watch, hoping they would understand. Just as he did so, he regained consciousness.

LEFT: The atheist and materialist philosopher AJ Ayer had a Near Death Experience after choking on some smoked salmon and going into cardiac arrest. His scepticism was only slightly dented by his afterlife vision.

Ayer later wrote an essay "What I saw when I was dead" (*Sunday Telegraph*, 28 Aug 1988) and remarked that such experiences might raise a presumption that consciousness does not end with death. However, he remained sceptical about the afterlife and sought to clarify his position in an article "Postscript to a Post-mortem" (*Spectator*, 15 Oct 1988) stating:

"What I should have said… is that my experiences have weakened, not my belief that there is no life after death, but my inflexible attitude towards that belief… My experiences caused me to think that it was worth examining various possibilities of survival for their own sakes."

So, though one might not call Ayer as a witness for survival, he was no longer quite the hostile witness of before.

As Alan Warner wrote in *The Timeless Moment* (1946) 30 years earlier: "What exactly happens in the Self to us on these obscure occasions can never be completely known. We are in regions where the precise language of science is not spoken and must be content if we can approach truth with the aid of metaphor and simile, after looking as closely as possible within ourselves."

Connections between meetings with ghosts and dream states have long been postulated; ghosts are often nocturnal and seen in bedrooms and when either falling asleep or when waking up. (See *Hauntings and Apparitions* (1982) by Andrew MacKenzie.) GNM Tyrrell proposed a complicated theory of apparitions being hallucinations triggered by the unconscious mind in response to a telepathic or psychic signal, worked up and transmitted as an image into consciousness in either a dream or when the witness is awake. This image is projected on to the external 'screen' of the witness's surroundings, being 'seen' in the mind's eye as a ghost. Sometimes the mind could conjure an accompanying and entirely phantom background or scenery appropriate for the ghost (timeslip experiences may reflect this).

Often the apparition conforms with the lighting conditions prevailing at the time. Thus, if it is dark, the ghost may appear correspondingly indistinct and shadowy, as a real person would. That was certainly true of the ghost I saw in the darkness of an early January morning in 2011, though some spectres do appear to be luminous and glow in the dark. Symbolic elements may be added (e.g. the ghost of someone who dies by drowning is perceived dripping with water). The American philosopher CS Peirce was the first to state these essential points clearly: all thought is transacted in signs, and every sign by its nature leads on to another sign that interprets and develops it, each one capable of opening up an endless series of further signs indefinitely. Tyrrell maintained the imagery was produced by the unconscious portions of the brain.

In this regard, Keith Hearne's research into lucid dreaming proves a particularly intriguing insight into image formation and the abilities of the dreamer to control the content of their dreams, a phenomenon dubbed the 'light switch' effect.

In further experiments Hearne wanted to see if lucid dreamers could – within their dreamscape – alter the level of brightness by switching a light on or off. Eight subjects, five women and three men all attempted to do this and reported that they failed completely, save for one in the

ABOVE: The Black Monk of Pontefract in the 2012 film *When the Lights Went Out*.

MOVIESTORE COLLECTION LTD / ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

dream who had the idea of covering their own eyes, whereupon the light came on.

Remarkably, the dream world also seemed able to manipulate itself and create a reason why the lucid dreamer was powerless to alter the level of brightness. In some cases, the dreamer perceived lights as fusing or flickering, or the switch was missing. Though conscious of themselves, it seems limits are imposed on the ability of lucid dreamers to alter certain aspects of the imagery, suggesting these are being fixed by an even deeper level of the brain and mind. ("A Light-Switch Phenomenon in Lucid Dreams" in *Journal of Mental Imagery* vol 5(2) 1981.) The 'ghost' in the machine (as consciousness has been dubbed) is unable to alter the machine.

Now here one may notice a marked distinction with the powers of allegedly disembodied ghosts and spirits. One thing ghosts seem very adept at is switching lights on and off, as judged by descriptions of activity from haunted houses. This ability to affect lights and the means of illumination pre-dates electricity. As shades approach in *Richard III* Shakespeare has "the lights burn blue" (Act 5, Scene 3).

'The Demon Drummer of Tedworth' in 1661 snatched "a candle lighted out of the Serving man's hand, which was never heard of after". At Little Gaddesden Manor House, Hertfordshire, a churchwarden called William Jarman committed suicide. Afterwards he returned and specialised in putting out candles and later electric lights. Eventually he became so dreadfully troublesome that an owner resorted to a 'bell, book and candle exorcism'. Thereafter, Jarman's spirit was still reputed to make the lights burn low on a certain day every year, but at the eve of the 1970s no one could remember which day it was!

At Folkstone, in 1917, candles in an air-raid shelter were mysteriously extinguished amid other poltergeist events. Natural gas from strata was blamed. (See "The Folkstone Poltergeist" by WF Barrett & T Hesketh, *Journal* of the SPR, 1917-18, pp.155-82.)

In 1940 a nun-like figure appearing each New Year's Eve at a school in Cheltenham appeared to make an electric torch brandished by the headmaster fail in his hand (*Gazetteer of British Ghosts* (1971) by Peter Underwood). In 1958, a ghost at a Welsh mansion put out builders' lamps, causing the men to flee. One man broke his leg in his flight and later sued the Council (*Ghosts and Hauntings* (1965) by Dennis Bardens).

The 'Black Monk of Pontefract' poltergeist of 1966-68 ended up with a 2012 film about it called *When the Lights Went Out* (see **FT293:28-37**) commemorating its menacing performances.

Electrical light interference may be reported after the death of spouses or family members. After the death of her husband Paul in New York in January 1983, Sylvia H Wright witnessed repeated flickerings of a lamp, which she found significant. (See "Experiences of Spontaneous PK After Bereavement", *Journal* of the SPR vol 62 No.852, 1998.)

Peter McCue received an account from a widow detailing how several months after her husband's death in 1990, domestic electrical switches began being turned off; apparently the deceased man had a 'pet hate' in life concerning people leaving switches on unnecessarily. ("Theories of Haunting: A Critical Overview", *Journal* of SPR 2002 vol 66.)

In 2013 Edward Baldwin (1938-2021) 4th Earl Baldwin of Bewdley, told me of experiencing multiple instances of strange flickering lights following the death of his wife Sarah in 2001. He compiled a 10,000-word manuscript recounting these incidents (Lord Baldwin, personal communications 5+8 Oct 2013).

I had a personal experience of this myself following the death of my father Keith Murdie in July 2015. Several weeks afterwards I was talking with my mother in the lounge of my parents' home in Suffolk, discussing what should be done with his collection of weight-lifting trophies. Suddenly, we heard an audible 'click' as the kitchen light was spontaneously switched on. It seemed a gesture of approval. The light switch had never behaved like this before, nor did I ever notice it doing so again.

Are these effects attributable to the dead, or to the living? In the United States, Louisa Rhine analysed cases of spontaneous PK from the Duke University Case Collection 1945-1960 and listed interference with lights as commonplace; note also Street Lamp Interference (**FT273:52-55**) – the alleged ability of some people consciously to affect streetlights. ("Spontaneous physical effects and the psi process" by Louisa Rhine (1963) *Journal of Parapsychology* 27, 84-122; Hilary Evans (1993) *SLIders: The Enigma of Streetlight Interference*).

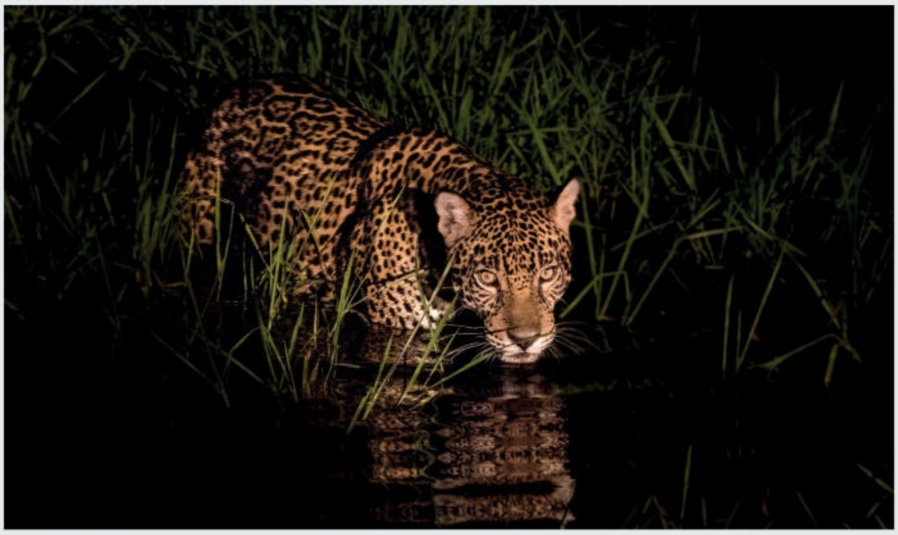
'Philip', the ghost invented by the Toronto based New Horizons group in 1972 (**FT61:41-42, 166:37, 212:59, 227:16, 302:69, 305:73, 351:18, 381:19, 383:60-61**), could make light bulbs flicker on request. (See "Conjuring Up Philip" by Robert Charman in *The Paranormal Review* (2007) Issue 48.)

Even more intriguing is that after undergoing a Near Death Experience, as well as altering their outlook, experiencers may also talk of odd physical effects around them. Watches stop working, some suffer electrical appliances breaking down or severe shocks when touching electrical switches, light bulbs fuse, kettles and radios and televisions spontaneously switch on or off and computers malfunction in their presence (*The Wisdom of Near-Death Experiences: How Understanding NDEs Can Help Us Live More Fully* (2013) by Penny Sartori).

"More light!" Goethe is reputed to have said on his death bed. But as with these puzzles of consciousness, just what he meant, might have seen or what was going on raises more questions than we can answer.

ALIEN ZOO NEWS FROM THE CRYPTOZOOLOGICAL GARDEN

KARL SHUKER asks if a jaguar can change its spots and dredges up a Loch Ness discovery


SCOTT PHARES / ISTOCK

NATIONAL OCEANOGRAPHY CENTRE

ABOVE: The unusual speckled specimen pictured in a report on Brazilian jaguar research. **LEFT:** Nessie expert Adrian Shine with the underwater camera in its housing.

AN UNEXPECTED JAGUAR

In a recent study reported online by the website *The Cool Down* (*TCD*), researchers from Brazil's Mamirauá Sustainable Development Reserve were very surprised to discover that jaguars inhabiting the Brazilian Amazon have developed a most unusual behavioural adaptation for surviving this region's annual flooding, which raises water levels by up to 16m (52ft). Namely, instead of moving to dry land during that wet period, these big cats move upwards, remaining high up in the rainforest trees for as long as four entire months at a time, living and hunting prey there until the floods recede and they can then descend to ground level once more.

Whereas this is certainly a fascinating find, something entirely different included in this *TCD* report attracted my particular attention – a colour photo of a wild jaguar. For instead of its pelage being golden-brown in colour and possessing a very ornate pattern of rosettes all over like typical jaguars, this particular individual sported very pale, almost white fur, and its rosettes, such that actually existed, were predominantly confined to its dorsal region and hindquarters. Everywhere else, its markings consisted merely of solid speckles and small blotches. What made this distinctive jaguar so noteworthy for me was that back in the early 1990s, Peruvian zoologist Dr Peter J Hocking had documented in the now-defunct International Society of Cryptozoology's scientific journal, *Cryptozoology*, various accounts of several mysterious, unclassified cat forms from his home country. One of these, a jaguar-sized felid dubbed the speckled tiger ('tiger' being the Latin American name for the jaguar), morphologically corresponds very closely indeed with the *TCD* jaguar, by allegedly possessing small solid speckles instead of well-formed rosettes, and a very pale, greyish background coat coloration rather than a golden-brown one. As I noted in my 2020 book *Mystery Cats of the World Revisited*, I'd long suspected that rather than representing some new, scientifically-undescribed species of big cat, the speckled tiger most plausibly constituted individuals of the known jaguar species, *Panthera onca*, but exhibiting abnormally-patterned, paler-than-typical pelages. Yet without any tangible evidence that such specimens exist, this could only be speculation.

Now, however, the *TCD* report's photo provides conclusive evidence that such jaguars do indeed exist, thus offering a convincing identity for the speckled tiger. Cryptozoological answers sometimes turn up in the most unexpected ways and places! *www.thecooldown.com/outdoors/tree-dwelling-jaguars-brazil-flooding-amazon/*

SMILE, NESSIE, YOU'RE ON CAMERA... OR NOT.

Back in 1970, the then-active Loch Ness Investigation Bureau (LNIB), a group of researchers seeking evidence for the existence of the Loch Ness Monster, lowered an underwater camera approximately 180m (590ft) down into the famously dark depths of the loch in the hope of filming its elusive alleged inhabitant. That was 55 years ago, but the camera, apparently one of six, was never retrieved and has been submerged there ever since – until now, that is. As reported in late March 2025 by the BBC and other media, an ocean-going bona fide yellow submarine dubbed *Boaty McBoatyface*, was being put through its paces in Loch Ness by the UK's National Oceanography Centre (NOC) when this robotic research vessel's propeller snagged the mooring of the 1970 camera. The latter was duly hauled up, and its footage examined, just in case any images of Nessie had indeed been snapped. Sadly, however, none was present, but one of the submarine's engineers did succeed in developing a few that depicted the loch's murky waters. Those of Loch Ness are so peaty that it was always highly unlikely that even if a huge creature or creatures did exist here, the camera would be able to obtain any visual evidence, but it was deemed to be worth a try, just in case, back in those more optimistic times half a century ago, for the reality of the LNM as a bona fide novel, scientifically-undiscovered species. According to Adrian Shine of the present-day Loch Ness Project: "It was an ingenious camera trap consisting of a clockwork Instamatic camera with an inbuilt flash cube, enabling four pictures to be taken when a bait line was taken. It is remarkable that the housing has kept the camera dry for the past 55 years, lying more than 130m (427ft) deep in Loch Ness." Remarkable indeed – although when Loch Ness is involved, nothing would surprise me any more – short of Nessie surfacing and smiling broadly for a selfie snapped by a shiny new camera! As for the old one: together with its film and housing, it can now be found at The Loch Ness Centre at Drumnadrochit.*www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/cx20g82y1k8o*

STRANGE CONTINENT

ULRICH MAGIN trawls the European papers for the latest news of art, eruptions and suspicious sucides

PIGGY ART PRANK

Modern art is sometimes hard to swallow – as in a recent case where an artist bought three piglets which he put into a cage made of old shopping trolleys to have them "painfully" die from hunger.

Danish-Chilean artist Marco Evaristti caused the expected outcry from the public, but explained that every day, thousands of pigs die from hunger and lack of space in the farms where our meat is produced – so what he did, he argued, would have happened anyway, and he wished to raise awareness of the simple fact this happens! And he succeeded.

Then, just as outrage about his plans reached a crescendo, the artist said the pigs had been stolen by an animal protection group. They confirmed they had the animals, but said it had been arranged with a friend of the artist. "So was it only a publicity stunt?" asked the papers. Evaristti denies the whole thing was planned, but said he was happy with the outcome: "I thought about it for a few hours and realised that the piggies will at least have a happy life", he told the press. *stern.de, 8 Mar 2025.*

MYSTERY BELL RINGING

The bells of the Kohlenstraße cemetery chapel in Wuppertal, Germany, started ringing for hours on end, in the middle of the night. When this had happened several times, the Cemetery Association had the mechanism checked, but was unable to detect any fault. There was no damage in the control box or to the wires. Among the ideas put forward were that blackouts in eastern parts of the city or remote control car keys had started the bells ringing. The mystery continues. *Wuppertaler Rundschau, 8 Mar 2025.*

ASSOCIATED PRESS / ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

ABOVE: The three little piggies in their shopping trolley cage; now they can look forward to a life of freedom.

He said the pigs had been stolen by an animal protection group

EUROPE IN UPHEAVAL

After the floods, and the droughts before the floods, it was earthquakes and volcanoes for Europe in the early months of 2025. They concentrated on Santorini in Greece, Etna and the Aeolian Islands, and finally Naples and the Phlegræan Fields.

In the evening of 2 February, a magnitude 3.2 quake hit Tuscany, especially around Siena. On 6 February, a magnitude 4.8 quake hit the Aeolian islands of Alicudi and Filicudi. *merkur.de, 10 Feb; t-online.de, 7 Feb 2025.*

Then, the earth began quaking for several weeks on Santorini, the Greek island popular with holiday-makers, which is the remains of a once gigantic volcano whose eruption c1600 BC is thought by some archæologists to be the origin of the tale of Atlantis and the background to the Exodus recounted in the Bible. Between 26 January and 4 February 2025, more than 7,700 quakes were registered by the Geological Faculty of Athens, the strongest with a magnitude of 5.1. Inhabitants and tourists fled the island in February, while all schools were closed. The quakes continued, some of them lasted for more than an hour, and the Greek government declared a state of emergency. There were fears that the island's two active volcanoes, the one in the centre of the island ring and one below the sea, might erupt. In March, the situation in Thera slowly returned to normal; the quakes became less intense, of low magnitude and now occurred only several times per hour, and the island's inhabitants returned from their exile.

Scientists were undecided whether the cause of the quakes was tectonic or whether they were triggered by the movement of lava deep below the island. *Kölner Stadt-Anzeiger, 8 Feb; ntv, 9 Feb; rheinpfalz.de, 15 Feb; General-.Anzeiger, 10 Mar 2025.*

On 9 February, the Bocca Nuova crater of Mount Etna erupted. On the same day, two minor quakes (magnitude 0.7 and 1.5) were registered in the Phlegræan Fields, while an hour before, two tremors of magnitudes 2.3 and 2.5 were measured in the volcano of Vesuvius, not too far away. *sueddeutsche.de, 11 Feb; fr.de, 12 Feb 2025.*

However, while Santorini relaxed, things heated up in Naples. In mid-March, the city experienced a 4.4. magnitude quake with the epicentre at the Phlegræan Fields, while a quake hit Apulia the next day. The shaking was so strong that parts of Naples were evacuated just to be on the safe side. *General-Anzeiger, 14 Mar; ntv, 15+16 Mar 2025.*

These tremors and volcanic threats will certainly continue. In the meantime, catastrophic floods caused by torrential rain have returned – as, for example, in the floods in Tuscany and Spain in mid-March. There, after heavy rains, 19 rivers in Andalusia were in flood, 40 motorways closed, and 350 houses had to be evacuated at Campanilles near Málaga. *General-Anzeiger, 17+19 Mar 2025*.

DANGER: RUSSIAN WINDOWS!

Suicide clusters have often been discussed in the fortean literature, although the large number of people who are critical of Putin and die suspicious deaths is probably unprecedented (see **FT421:8-9, 424:22-23**). I refer not to critics of Putin who were evidently murdered by the Russian secret service, like Memzov, Litvinenko, Skripal or Navalny, but largely unknown people who just could not agree with their leader's politics.

On 19 October 2024, 64-year-old former oil oligarch Mikhail Rogachev was found dead by an agent of Russia's secret service, SVR, who was walking the dog of a high ranking officer. Rogachev had "fallen from a window" on the 10th floor of a Moscow apartment building and had left a farewell letter to his family. On 13 November 2024, 42-year-old TV chef Alexei Zimin was found dead in his Belgrade hotel. Zimin had been the host of a popular TV cookery show in Russia which was cancelled after he disagreed with Putin's war. Zimin had fled to Serbia. Soon after, on 16 November, 39-year-old ballet dancer Vladimir Shklyarov fell from his balcony on the fifth floor of a St Petersburg apartment house. Shklyarov had been an outspoken critic of the war against Ukraine. In the Russian cases, police concluded that the deaths were accidents caused by drug abuse, while in Serbia officials told the BBC there were "no suspicious circumstances".

More than a year before this death cluster, *sueddeutsche.de* listed suspicious window falls and curious deaths of Putin critics, among them:

- On 23 February 2022, 61-year-old oligarch Alexander Tjuljakov was found hanged in his garage. The body of the former Gazprom vice general was covered with marks of a brutal assault.
- On 19 April 2022, the body of Sergei Protosenya was found hanged in his garden at his villa at Lloret de Mar, Spain. His wife and 18-year-old daughter were also found dead. Russian media claimed Protosenya had killed his family and hanged himself, but Spanish police did not confirm this claim.
- On 1 September 2022, Ravil Maganov, CEO of the Russian oil company Lukoil, fell from a hospital window. In March 2022 he had called for an "instant end of the conflict" with Ukraine.
- On 22 September 2022 Ivan Petshorin was found dead in the Sea of Vladivostok. Police said he fell from his luxury yacht while intoxicated.
- On 16 February 2023 Marina Yankina, a high-ranking official of the Russian Defence Ministry, fell from the 16th floor of a St Petersburg high rise. She had been responsible for the financing of the war against Ukraine.
- On 20 May 2023, on a flight from Cuba to Moscow, 46-year-old Pjotr Kutsherenko, Russia's vice-secretary of the Science Ministry, died after he had called Putin's war a "fascist invasion".

If nothing else, this cluster of Putin-related sudden deaths suggests that it's unwise to become closely involved with the Russian President… and then to disagree with him. On the other hand, if all these deaths are unrelated, they are certainly a mystery worthy of the best fortean sleuths. A wiki page on Suspicious Russia-related deaths since 2022 (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Suspicious_Russia-related_deaths_since_2022) lists 65 cases, the most recent from 5 February 2025 when 59-year-old musician Vadim Stroykin fell out of the ninth floor window of his apartment, while being investigated by security services for donating to the Ukrainian army. *sueddeutsche.de, 24 Aug 2023; prosieben.de, 23 Oct; watson.ch, 14 Nov; fr.de, 20 Nov 2024.*

LEFT: Donald MacMillan in 1922 at the wheel of a schooner of his own design.

100 YEARS AGO

There has been some argument lately about which country Greenland belongs to, although it is obvious that it belongs to the people who live there – the Greenlanders. It might be part of Northern America geographically, but it belongs to Europe politically. Meanwhile, I have some old Greenland news …

In June 1925 newspapers (for example, *Vorwärts*, 17 June 1925) reported on the expedition of the American explorere and sailor Donald MacMillan to the North Pole in search of a mysterious island that various polar explorers had recently reported, without its existence being conclusively proven. "The island, estimated to cover more than 1 million square kilometres, is said to be located somewhere near the Pole, either west or northwest of Axel Heiberg Land. Perhaps this vast area is covered with plants and populated by animals; perhaps it is an icy desert inhabited only by a few polar bears." The first man to have seen its mountain peaks and plateaux was Robert Peary in 1906, who named the island "Crocker Land." MacMillan had also seen the island, but as he approached, the mountain formations vanished into nothingness, and he declared the island was an illusion. However, in 1914, MacMillan returned to the polar region, and he and his crew again saw the strange mountain peaks on the horizon. Based on these observations, he located the land about 200km (124 miles) from Cape Columbia on the coast of Grant Land, the northern lobe of Ellesmere Island. He then advanced into this area with sleds and reached a point about 30km (18 miles) from the presumed location, but found nothing but icy desert. Since his companions were completely exhausted and the dogs could go no further, he had to turn back. Then he steered his ship, the Santa Maria, to the spot where Peary had sighted the mysterious island, and once again the peaks and plateaux rose tantalisingly before him. However, a storm arose, the ship was driven away, and once again his search was in vain. MacMillan did, however, observe various signs, especially changes in the tides, from which he believed he could deduce the presence of a vast land area. Now in 1925, MacMillan hoped to solve the mystery of the island. He was using two seaplanes, each capable of flying for 10 hours continuously and equipped with devices for use on the ice. A base for these aircraft was to be built on Axel Heiberg Land, which would be in constant wireless contact with the aircraft and the naval base 300km southeast: once and for all he would determine whether this island was merely a figment of his imagination or an actual land mass. This was not to be. As Wikipedia sums up: "The aerial results proved to be disappointing due to severe weather conditions, unreliable engines and inadequate navigational tools."

CUM ON FEEL THE NOIZE

Hums, drones, taps, screeches and the fizzing and buzzing of the Northern Lights

LAUREN-GRACE KIRTLEY

VIRTUAL-PANO / CREATIVE COMMONS

ABOVE: Lauren-Grace Kirtley is one of the many residents of the Isle of Lewis (right) to have reported an intrusive hum. **LEFT**: Meanwhile, the Killurin landfill site in Wexford seems to be home to a screaming banshee.

HEBRIDEAN HUM

The latest place to suffer from "The Hum" is the island of Lewis in the Hebrides, off western Scotland. About 200 people have reported hearing it, with Lauren-Grace Kirtley saying it had ruined her sleep, adding, "It's impossible to ignore – it is like somebody shouting in your face constantly for attention." The local council, Comhairle nan Eilean Siar, is, as is common in these cases, investigating with little success, but Marcus-Hazel McGowan has been utilising amateur radio techniques to try and pin the source down. "It's just trying to narrow it down and hoping nobody loses their mind completely over it." he says. Kirtley says that while the hum was audible right across Lewis, it was less noticeable in the centre of the island and strongest on the east coast. "It is a very low humming, droning, pulsating noise. It's incredibly intrusive and distressing," she added, saying that it had been recorded as having a frequency of 50hz, and that she gets "a lot of fluttering in my ears. It's making me dizzy and giving me headaches." McGowan says the Battery Point Power Station in Stornoway has been ruled out as the cause, and while some have suggested the ferries travelling to and from the mainland are responsible, he doesn't think it originates from any boats. Other islanders blame TV masts, or mating fish, which turned out to be behind a persistent hum in Florida (see **FT442:21**; the same explanation was suggested for a hum in Hythe, Hampshire, in 2013; see **FT309:22**). Some have suggested that the hearers are just suffering from tinnitus. A council spokesperson said "the environmental health team is investigating and will liaise with those who have reported issues." *BBC News, 28 Apr 2025.*

SPONDON SQUEAL

Since April 2024, residents of the small town of Spondon in Derbyshire have been plagued by a mysterious high-pitched noise that can be heard round the clock. Local resident Tansy Collins said: "My niece could hear a beeping sound continuously. We couldn't hear it so thought it must be something pretty high-pitched." Various people commenting on social media had their own ideas about what the noise might be, with Andy Beecham saying, "I thought it may be from the wind turbines," and Daniel Lifty suggesting "refrigeration from the new energy centre building". A Spondon council statement said, "Residents who live near the south of Spondon can hear it most and even residents in Borrowash have reported it; however, we have to date not been able to identify where it is coming from" and appealed for information. *metro.co.uk, 15 Apr 2024.*

LANDFILL BANSHEE

In Wexford, Ireland, the source of a loud "screeching noise" was not in doubt; the problem was working out what was causing it and how it might be stopped. People living near the Killurin landfill site were beset by the constant noise from the site, but Wexford County Council, who were investigating, were at a loss as to what could actually be behind it, with Councillor Garry Laffan saying "I don't know if it's a banshee screaming or what it is." He added, "The man who contacted me lives a good half mile from the old landfill site and you could hear it clear as day from his house," and concluded, "I don't know what it is to be honest with you. To me it sounds like some kind of pressure being released. Some kind of squealing caused by that." *m.independent.ie, 22 Oct 2024.*

TEDIOUS TAPPING

The resident of a block of flats in North Vancouver, Canada, named only as 'RK', has been driven to distraction by a persistent "tapping noise" in his bedroom ceiling from a source that eludes discovery. It began in summer 2020, and by January 2022 it was disrupting his sleep several times a week. RK asked his upstairs neighbour, Alan Zenuk, to help him find its source, but Zenuk refused. By April 2022, the sound had escalated to "percussive strikes, tapping, scraping, dragging and clunking noises" day and night. Using a sound meter app, RK recorded the noise over 100 times, finding that the peak sound level was 73.8 decibels and the average level was 58.2, well above the 30 decibels maximum recommended for good sleep. This resulted in RK making 443 noise complaints to the flat's management company, but they were unsuccessful at finding the source of the noises, which were only audible in RK's flat. However, they fined Zenuk $42,600 for antisocial behaviour. Zenuk took the management to a tribunal to reverse this,

BRIAN TOMLINSON PHOTOGRAPHY / FLICKR

ABOVE: The Northern Lights over Newport Pagnell, Buckinghamshire, photographed by Brian Tomlinson on 11 Oct 2024; some people, it seems, can not only see but also hear the aurora.

as he says that he and his wife can't hear the noise when they're home, so they can't control it. He suggested the source might be one of the building's systems, so the management turned off the heating and cooling systems, but RK could still hear the noise. After further expert advice, they completely drained the systems, but a management company representative could still hear the sounds in RK's flat, and exactly what causes them remains mysterious. Social media commentators have suggested RK might actually be suffering from a poltergeist, while Zenuk says he has "put felt pads on his furniture, and he has started avoiding his bedroom as much as possible and going to bed later, but otherwise, there is nothing he can do." *cbc.ca, 28 Jun 2024.*

MULTIMEDIA AURORA

In recent months, with the Sun's 11-year cycle reaching the solar maximum (see **FT450:42-45**), the Northern Lights have occasionally been visible much further south than usual, and with that, there has been an increase in people reporting hearing the aurora as well as seeing it. Alison Andrews, 70, from Gloucestershire, who experienced the display, remembered a great aunt telling her about her experience of the phenomenon: "She heard a fizzing, buzzing sound, and then the sky lit up all around her." Andrews was disappointed she could not hear them too. Others describe the sounds as being like static, leaves rustling or rain when the skies are clear. Anika Dhanda, from Hillingdon in London, experienced the lights twice, and each time they came with a sound she described as "like clicky rain". For a long time, the experience of auroral sound was dismissed as "psychological" or "illusory" and attempts to record it were unsuccessful until the Auroral Acoustics programme in Finland managed to do so 20 years ago. What actually produces the sound, though, remains unknown. Professor Unto K Laine, from Aalto University, who was involved in the Finnish research, concluded that "auroral sounds are produced with a separate process from the auroral light production" and believes that the noise is caused by electrical discharges taking place 70m to 100m (230 to 328ft) above the ground, but that "both have the same geomagnetic background causing synchronism between these phenomena." He thinks audible sounds occur with an aurora if there is an atmospheric inversion layer where warm air sits above a layer of colder air, something that often happens at night. Negative ions are carried up by the warm air and interact with positive ions from the geomagnetic storm, producing an electrical discharge that makes the crackling sounds. *metro.co.uk, 26 Nov 2024.*

MYTHCONCEPTIONS

by Mat Coward

291: POMPEII PEOPLE

ILLUSTRATIONS BY HUNT EMERSON

The myth

Tragedy tourists enjoying a ghouls' sojourn in Pompeii can see the petrified bodies of victims of the ancient eruption of Mount Vesuvius.

The "truth"

They're not dead bodies. They're basically statues. Nineteenth century archæologists excavating the site uncovered human-shaped voids, where people had been caught in the pyroclastic flow which then cooled and hardened around them. Holes are not very easy things to display, so in the 1860s boss archæologist Giuseppe Fiorelli invented a method of filling the cavity with plaster of Paris. The resulting simulacrum could then be painstakingly chipped out, giving a precise, three-dimensional image of a human, or other creature, at the moment of its death. Right from the start, many visitors have mistakenly believed – to their delight or disgust, presumably, depending on character – that they were looking at actual corpses.

Sources

www.iflscience.com/the-stone-bodies-of-pompeii-arent-what-you-think-68838; pompeiisites.org/en/pompeii-map/analysis/the-casts/; www.felicecalchi.com/en/the-man-who-discovered-the-pompeians-2/

Disclaimer

True, some of the casts do contain bones which were still present when the plaster was funnelled in. (Believe it or not, some casts have been made of transparent resin to show the bones off. I mean, seriously, what is wrong with people?) But that doesn't make them petrified bodies; it just makes them bone-in statues.

Mythchaser

Now, listen: supposing you had, in the first place, a myth ("Trespassers will be prosecuted"); then you had a debunking ("No they won't. Trespass is not a crime under the laws of England and Wales"); and then they changed the law (the Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Act 2022 makes trespass under certain circumstances a criminal offence); but not everybody knows about the change, so the debunking is still used and has therefore, itself, become a myth. I ask you, fortean egregore, do we have a term for this phenomenon?

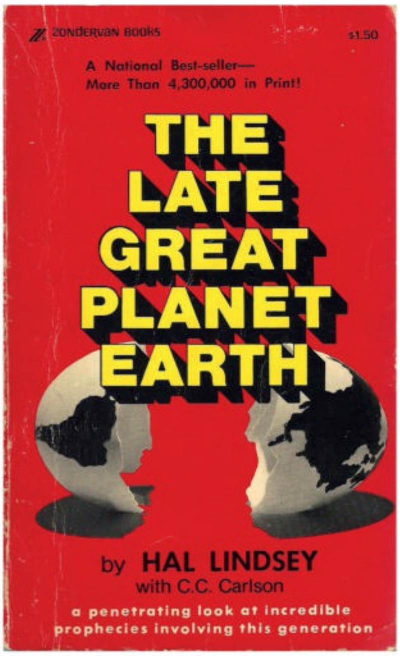
BUGGER OFF!
OR ELSE!

NECROLOG

This month, we say goodbye to a popular promoter of the coming Apocalypse and a gentle cryptozoologist who just couldn't say no to a weird theory...

HAL LINDSEY

Former tugboat captain turned preacher Hal Lindsey made an indelible mark on public consciousness in the US as an apocalypse populariser. His 1970 book, *The Late Great Planet Earth*, cowritten with journalist Carole C Carlson, sold over 35 million copies and brought End Times theology into the modern world by linking biblical prophecy to current and forthcoming events in a creative and imaginative manner. Having had an initial success with apocalyptic prophecy, Lindsey doubled down and produced more, churning out additional fire-and-brimstone bestsellers with titles like *Satan Is Alive and Well on Planet Earth* and *Planet Earth Two Thousand AD: Will Mankind Survive?*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More Than 4,300,000 in Print!

THE LATE GREAT PLANET EARTH

by HAL LINDSEY
with C.C. Carlson

a penetrating look at incredible prophecies involving this generation

ABOVE AND LEFT: Hal Lindsey and the book that first brought him to public attention. **OPPOSITE PAGE:** François de Sarre, cryptozoologist and champion of the initial bipedelism theory.

Lindsey's success led to other writers such as Tim LaHaye, Jerry Jenkins, and Joel Rosenberg jumping on the lucrative End Times bandwagon, bringing the once-obscure theology of dispensationalist premillennialism into the mainstream, expressing it in increasingly lurid terms. The popular appeal of Lindsey and his imitators came because they spoke to white Christian audiences in straightforward language and addressed their then-current concerns such as Vietnam, protests, riots, the exploding counterculture, conflict in the Middle East, and the threat of nuclear war, explaining that these were all preordained by the Bible as signs of Jesus's imminent return, making obscure biblical prophecy relevant to modern life. Lindsey's success was such that in 1977, *Publisher's Weekly* described him as "an Adventist-and-Apocalypse evangelist who sports a Porsche racing jacket and tools around Los Angeles in a Mercedes 450 SI".

While many of his ideas have become intrinsic to US evangelical thought, Lindsey's direct influence waned in later years, partly because his many divorces raised questions about his character among those who considered themselves devout, but also because he fell into the trap of putting dates to his prophecies. He said all of the Bible's prophecy would likely be fulfilled "within 40 years or so of 1948," based on a close reading of Matthew 24. This didn't happen, and although he attempted to highlight the "or so" part, the collapse of the Soviet Union, which Lindsey portrayed as the Antichrist incarnate, further dented his prophetic credibility when it happened without Christ returning. Lindsey, though, was sanguine about this, saying: "There's just a split second's difference between a hero and a bum. I didn't ask to be a hero, but I guess I have become one in the Christian community. So I accept it. But if I'm wrong about this, I guess I'll become a bum".

Hal Lindsey, Apocalypse promoter and author; born 23 Nov 1929, Houston, Texas; died 25 Nov 2024, Tulsa, Oklahoma, aged 95.

FRANÇOIS DE SARRE

François Charousset de Sarre, the creator of the hypothesis of "initial bipedalism", an alternative vision of mankind's evolution, passed away on 5 February, aged 77. Inspired by the writings of his friend Bernard Heuvelmans, he became convinced that man was not the most evolved, but the most primitive animal on the planet. In September 1988, he started his journal *Bipedia*, with material by himself and others in English, French, German, and sometimes even in his native German dialect spoken in the French Lorraine. Most papers – until the last issue, #22 in January 2004 – dealt with his thesis that man was the ancestor of all animal life – so that all animals are directly descended from man, who took centre stage in evolution, being the trunk for all animal branches. The most primitive human, though, was originally a jellyfish-like homunculus in the Precambrian era, a worm-like creature with an air-filled bubble to keep it afloat in the sea – which later became the human head with the brain inside. For English readers, he described some aspects of his ideas in the *CFZ Yearbook* 1996 and 1997. "Were aquatic pre-humans the first vertebrates to enter the land?" was the title of his second contribution. He also wrote a regular column on French forteana for the *INFO Journal* from 1994 until its demise in 1996.

His thesis met with little interest in traditional zoological circles, but this did not deter de Sarre. He worked mostly within the confines of cryptozoology, especially with researchers interested in relic hominids, but he was never shy of delving into and embracing subjects others had rejected, such as the ancient astronaut theory, catastrophic geology and the very German fad of claiming that mediæval monks had added some 300 phantom years to history; in its most extensive form this meant that the whole of classical Roman and Greek civilisation (literature, art and ruins) was faked in Renaissance times.

Yet François approached

JÖRG VOGEL

his work with such serene, impressive patience that you would be hard pressed to find anybody who did not greatly like this gentle person. Despite our considerable differences in opinion, he was always willing to help me.

François was born on 16 May 1947 in Dudweiler, in the German Saarland, of Lorraine parents. He studied zoology, botany, and palæontology at the University of the Saarland and worked as an ichthyologist. Between 1973 and 1976, he did research in Tunisia, and then moved to Nice in the south of France where he founded CERBI, the Centre d'etudes et de recherches sur la Bipedia Initiale. He also took part in archæological excavations at the famous prehistoric site of Lazeret in Nice. At that time, I was in regular contact with him but eventually we lost sight of each other when his research went into areas I was little interested in, and he moved to Thailand in the early 2000s where he lived with his wife, Aor Phimphong, in Ubon Ratchathani. François had several children and grandchildren. They will miss him, and so too will fortean researchers all over the globe.

François Charousset de Sarre, ichthyologist, cryptozoologist and alternative historian; born Dudweiler, 16 May 1947; died 5 Feb 2025, aged 77.

Ulrich Magin

FAIRIES, FOLKLORE AND FORTEANA

SIMON YOUNG FILES A NEW REPORT FROM THE INTERFACE OF STRANGE PHENOMENA AND FOLK BELIEF

VISIONS AT T'MILL

In the spring of 1875, a nine-year-old boy walked alone before dawn to his shift at a Yorkshire flax mill. Arthur Kirkbright, still rubbing the sleep out of his eyes, was about to have one of the most extraordinary experiences of his life. On a track in a wood, he saw, in front of him, a small woman in white dancing in silence, spinning, as she did, in circles. Fascinated but uneasy, Arthur held back. However, a girl he knew, heading off to her shift at t'mill, saw nothing and walked straight through the dancer.

It was not the last time Arthur would see diminutive figures in the wood. A few months later, he glimpsed, with four other children, a pair dancing on the same path. There was a small (but not tiny) old man and a young girl in greenish-brown garb, the man seeming to pull the girl against her will. All five children ran to investigate. But the pair had gone and the sandy path where they had pranced showed no prints at all. Arthur's mother, hearing the story, was unsurprised: "There was something strange about that wood." When she had been a child, she'd been escorted through the same trees at night, rushing to get a doctor, by two silent white dogs. They had vanished at the treeline.

> THERE WAS A SMALL (BUT NOT TINY) OLD MAN AND A YOUNG GIRL IN GREENISH-BROWN GARB

In his adolescence, Arthur and his brother may have met one of these white dogs while gathering firewood near a ravine next to the wood. They chased a pale dog to a stone wall; Arthur climbed, expecting to spot it nearby and hit it with a stick. The dog was gone. But, wait, across the ravine, 200 yards off, it sat looking back at him. There was no hole in the wall; no way through; and not even a greyhound runs that fast.

All this Arthur told a journalist in 1937, as an old man with a clear memory: if anyone is interested in Arthur's experience I've put up the full text on academia.edu. He did not give precise names, but we can trace his experiences through census records and maps. The mill he worked at was almost certainly Glasshouses. He lived at Middle Tongue. The ravine was Ravensgill. The woodland was Skrikes, to the south of Pateley Bridge.

So what do we do with these stories? Dismiss them as inventions? Delusions? The dancing unmaterial woman, the vanishing pair, the dogs that guarded and then disappeared? Arthur's tales conform to regional tradition: fairies dancing in circles, white spirit padfoot (common in the nearby Leeds area) and escorting canine spirits. Skrikes Wood evidently became a screen for popular ideas of the supernatural, Arthur's among them. Perhaps visions are still to be had there.

Simon Young is the editor of *The Cottingley Fairy Photographs: New Approaches to Fairies, Fakes and Folklore.*

Elusive UFOs and unwanted experts

NIGEL WATSON rounds up the latest news and views from the world of ufology

EXPERT OPINION

Is there such a thing as a UFO expert? When this term is applied to anyone there is usually a chorus from social media, saying no one is an expert on the subject. The media dubs people as UFO experts because it is easier than to say they are someone who knows a bit more than the average person about the subject. Even *Fortean Times* has committed this heinous crime by stating on the cover of its 2024 *UFO Files* collection: "Updates and analysis from UFO experts Jenny Randles and Nigel Watson." So in that case it must be true.

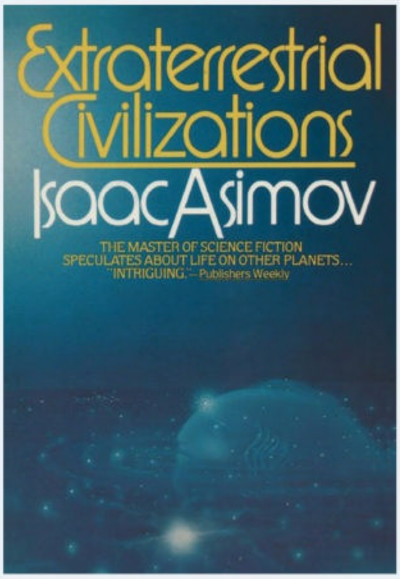
You can also get into the argument that asks: even if there are experts, are they trustworthy sources of information? Do you believe in the claims of Elizondo, Lazar, Pope, Keel, Good, Greer or Randles? They all have different agendas and differing viewpoints.

Science fiction author Arthur C Clarke put forward three laws; the second law declares: "When a distinguished but elderly scientist states that something is possible, he is almost certainly right. When he states that something is impossible, he is very probably wrong."

The late firebrand ufologist Stanton Friedman put forward the "David Susskind Syndrome." This expressed his frustration with the mainstream media's arrogance towards UFOs, and in his book *Flying Saucers and Science*, he states: "Susskind and everyone else would acknowledge that, if aliens were visiting Earth, and the government was covering it up, it would be a big and important story. But because he and other bright but clueless intellectuals such as Dr Carl Sagan and Dr Isaac Asimov take great pride in knowing about the important stories, and haven't known anything about flying saucers, then they must not be real. Anyone who thinks they are must not be very bright, and doesn't understand that such secrets couldn't possibly be kept from such smart people as Susskind, et al."

Sagan and Asimov would obviously fit into Clarke's "elderly scientist" category. I would argue that mainstream media have always been open to publishing UFO stories, and Friedman in his day got plenty of coverage, as did the likes of Dr J Allen Hynek. The media have been all over the UAP videos released in recent years, and are happy to publish all types of UFO stories. The sticking point – just as it is today – was that however many official documents Friedman waved about at his lectures, no tangible evidence has come to light.

Friedman was being unfair, as Sagan had taken an early interest in the subject of flying saucers, and was open to the idea that it was worthy of study even if he was sceptical that UFOs were of alien origin. Equally, Asimov was willing to speculate about extraterrestrial life – indeed in 1979 he wrote a nonfiction book, *Extraterrestrial Civilizations*, that looked at the possibility of life elsewhere in the Universe – but he regarded ufology as a pseudoscience.


Extraterrestrial
Civilizations
Isaac Asimov
THE MASTER OF SCIENCE FICTION
SPECULATES ABOUT LIFE ON OTHER PLANETS...
"INTRIGUING."—Publishers Weekly

Regarding evidence for the existence of UFOs and aliens, we should believe nothing – either from an expert, a scientist or a sceptic – until a real craft is exhibited or contact with extraterrestrials is made.

ELUSIVE BLIGHTERS

Bertrand Méheust in his essay "The Mystery of Elusiveness" points out that: "The imaginary world of science fiction did not only prefigure the visual appearance of future UAPs, and the subsequent representation of their supposed manifestations in UAPs magazines. Above all, it cleared and sometimes anticipated the phantasmagoria of close-up cases and abductions, which in my view constitutes the richest, most mysterious and most interesting form of UAP manifestation. The theme of abductions, whether perpetrated by mad scientists or extraterrestrials, runs obsessively through this popular literature."

From this starting point, Méheust argues that we are either dealing with "a phantasmagoria fed by contemporary culture" or there is some controlling mechanism that uses theatricality and elusiveness to tease our senses and "prevents us from gathering reliable and conclusive data on UAPs."

Charles Fort pondered this very question. In a letter to the *New York Times*, way back in September 1926, he wondered why Martian ships are so conspicuous in the night sky, yet no one acknowledges their existence. He answers his own question: "Perhaps because one of the best ways to keep a secret is to proclaim it? Almost every great discovery has been the final perception of the obvious. If it is not the conventional or respectable thing upon this earth to believe in visitors from other worlds, most of us could watch them a week and declare that they were something else, and likely enough make things disagreeable for anybody who thought otherwise."

Martin Kottmeyer goes into detail about this issue on his Facebook page and notes 'Fetridge's Law', which states: "Important things that are supposed to happen do not happen, especially when people are looking." This has been especially true of scientific studies in UFO hotspots, such as Project Hessdalen in Norway, Harley Rutledge's Project Identification in the Yakima Indian reservation and Project Twinkle, which tried to track unusual green fireballs in New Mexico.

Kottmeyer quotes ufologist Peter Kor's observation that: "The more dramatic and potentially decisive encounters are [the] more likely [they are] to involve comparatively untrained, unsophisticated witnesses."

Dr J Allen Hynek writing in the *International UFO Reporter* added two laws of ufology: "The first is that the greater the Strangeness Index of a UFO sighting, the greater the delay in hearing about it. The second is that some of the best and most puzzling cases, again cases of high strangeness, come to the attention of investigators by mere chance or serendipity – the unexpected finding of something while purposefully looking for something else."

The elusiveness of UFOs and UAPs have led them to be regarded as having characteristics far beyond our own scientific and technological abilities, rendering them as magical phenomena. Yet, ufologists still think they have been secretly captured and hidden by the US Government, or capable of being captured and revealed to the public.

My law is: "UFOs never land on the proverbial White House lawn."

Bertrand Méheust, "The Mystery of Elusiveness", Limina: The Journal of UAP Studies, Vol. 2, No. 1. limina.scholasticahq.com/article/131703-the-mystery-of-elusiveness

Martin Kottmeyer's Facebook page is at: www.facebook.com/la.wan.353

Beyond the time barrier

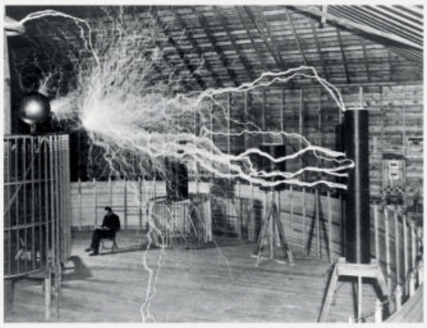
JENNY RANDLES considers the connections between time travel, Tesla and the Oz factor

What turned out to be my last book was written in 2004 – just as I was about to become a full-time carer, curtailing my ability to write or travel – and was called *Breaking The Time Barrier*. UFOs don't feature in it – it was about scientific attempts to establish the possibility of travel through time – and it wasn't intended to be my final word on the subject, until fate intervened.

My starting point was the then recent proof of what was called a Bose-Einstein condensate, named after a theory from these two famous physicists, decades earlier, who suggested that the speed of light should slow right down passing through this quantum state of matter.

It was decades before this could be demonstrated in action, but by the 1990s it was possible and the scientists who succeeded shared a Nobel prize. The tests showed that the behaviour of light passing through a Bose-Einstein condensate was just as had been theorised; and, remarkably, the weird consequences predicted also proved true. Heisenberg had found that if you could exactly define momentum (from mass and velocity) you had to be unclear as to position – the Uncertainty Principle. So if you created the condensate and passed light through it, then it should slow right down. But if you freeze those particles to absolute zero, they must have zero momentum; so if the Uncertainty Principle holds, as it does, then we know the momentum – zero – and we cannot therefore know the location: it must be uncertain.

Indeed, those experiments in the late 1990s and early 2000s established that with zero momentum the condensate does appear as Bose and Einstein predicted; however, there was a caveat. If you shone a beam of light into it, then the speed of that light beam fell a lot: from the normal light speed of 186,000 miles per second to 38 miles *per hour*. In repeated experiments a team at Harvard actually brought speed down to almost zero. If you can manipulate light in this way, is it possible to stop time? Or reverse it? Either way, this experiment unleashed one possible new way to look at time. Look at the Moon and you see it as it was just over a second ago – and with the Sun, eight minutes ago. And the light from some stars takes many years to reach us. We literally time travel just by using our eyes.



LEFT: Tesla with his "magnifying transmitter" in Colorado Springs in 1899.

I advised new BUFORA investigators that our job was to solve cases and put witnesses at ease

If someone on a planet 100 light years away could make light from Earth visible they would see us as a much less advanced civilisation than we now are, because they would be viewing the past. Unless, of course, they have ways to manipulate time – perhaps developed over another century or two of research – such as we are now starting to attempt. Maybe experiments in slowing or stopping time are the key. At the very least, what this tells us is that UFOs, if they are piloted craft, are very probably – in one sense or another – time machines, because they would have to traverse the vast Universe complying with these laws.

Of course, there may be twists and turns in understanding why these experiments resolve as they do; but for now perhaps we should be looking at the future of space flight by thinking more about shortening time rather than speeding up the way to the stars. Just as there was a space race in the 1960s, perhaps there will be a 'time race' to find a way to travel between star systems.

I became fascinated by the work of Nikola Tesla (see **FT217:33-39**). In 1895, the year HG Wells published *The Time Machine*, Tesla claimed to "accidentally have stepped out of normal space and time and entered a seemingly new dimension where time had space-like features". Tesla was a brilliant thinker with advanced – and sometimes off-the-wall – ideas, but he was no crank. He developed AC power, fluorescent lighting and much else. This flawed genius, who did so much to further our understanding of energy and power, may also have come close to being the world's first time traveller. He built a 200ft (60m) high tower to test his power system, which could generate 10 million volts; this led to all kinds of weird things being reported by locals, from sparks coming out of their kitchen taps to butterflies behaving as if drunk. Tesla claimed he was trying to create lightning to power homes, but he was so far ahead of his time that he was not able to control the immense power his system was generating.

By 1895 he had another experimental tower in New York State and was using huge rotating magnets that he claimed could alter time and space in their vicinity. The power created was so intense that when he once lost control of it, his skin began to tingle, his head pounded and he began to lose any sense of where he was. The oddest thing of all was that he experienced a sense of timelessness, as if his machine was ripping apart the local atmosphere and past, present and future were colliding.

On 13 March 1895 Tesla told a New York reporter that he had almost died when a ball of high-voltage energy emerged from his equipment and headed toward him, striking him on the shoulder. He thought it was the end, but the machine was shut off quickly by his assistant. Even so, Tesla reported that he became rooted to the spot and his mind began to act very strangely. He felt himself detaching from reality and entering a state where time was meaningless, but was also all around him: he could sense past, present and future all at once.

After this, he was convinced the power of his machine had revealed the true nature of time – and that you could move through it as you could through space. As with many of his ideas, this was written off as nonsense, and seems not to have led anywhere. However, did he perhaps, if by accident, touch the boundaries of time and space?

Interestingly to me, this close contact with an energy ball seems remarkably like several stories I have heard from UFO witnesses. They come from those describing encounters with balls of energy emitted by UFOs. Such witnesses have often reported the weird state of consciousness they seem to enter at that point, one where time stands still, paralysis occurs and they see weird things they later ascribe to UFOs or aliens. For years I have called this state the 'Oz Factor', and time lapses often follow it.

Might it be that Nikola Tesla was one of the first people to experience the Oz Factor?

If so, what might this tell us about what close encounters really are?

THE PANDORA'S BOX OF PARANOIAS

How does the bizarre and brutal murder of an agricultural worker in 1945 connect with Hammer films, naked witches and folk horror classic *The Wicker Man*, and what does this tell us about British identity? **CATHI UNSWORTH** talks to director Rupert Russell – son of the legendary Ken – about his new film, *The Last Sacrifice*.

How many detectives are faced with the entire population of an island putting on a play for them?”

This was the question director Robin Hardy posited as the central mystery to his 1973 masterpiece, *The Wicker Man* (see **FT381:40-41, 435:38-43**). In the screenplay devised by Anthony Shaffer,[1] Edward Woodward's Sergeant Neil Howie is despatched by seaplane to the remote Hebridean outpost of Summerisle to find missing schoolgirl Rowan Morrison. Here, he is led a merry dance by the locals, choreographed by their charismatic laird – embodied by Hammer's quintessential demonic toff, Christopher Lee. Swapping places with Morrison, Howie becomes the victim of his own inquiry, murdered in a horrific ritual sacrifice to the Old Gods inside the gigantic flaming effigy of the film's title.

Hardy's question had a precedent in real life. Just under 30 years earlier, Scotland Yard's Chief Inspector Robert Fabian was despatched to Lower Quinton in Warwickshire to investigate the bizarre murder of a 74-year-old man. Hedger and ditcher Charles Walton was carved up with the tools of his trade, his throat cut with his slash hook and body pinioned to the ground by his pitchfork, on Valentine's Day 1945. Arriving at the seemingly sleepy Cotswold village, Fabian was met by a fog of evasion from the locals, who implanted ideas of witchcraft and black hellhounds running amok over the scene of the crime, Iron Age hillfort Meon Hill, suggesting the victim had been ritually slain to appease ancient pagan deities (see **FT381:44-51**).

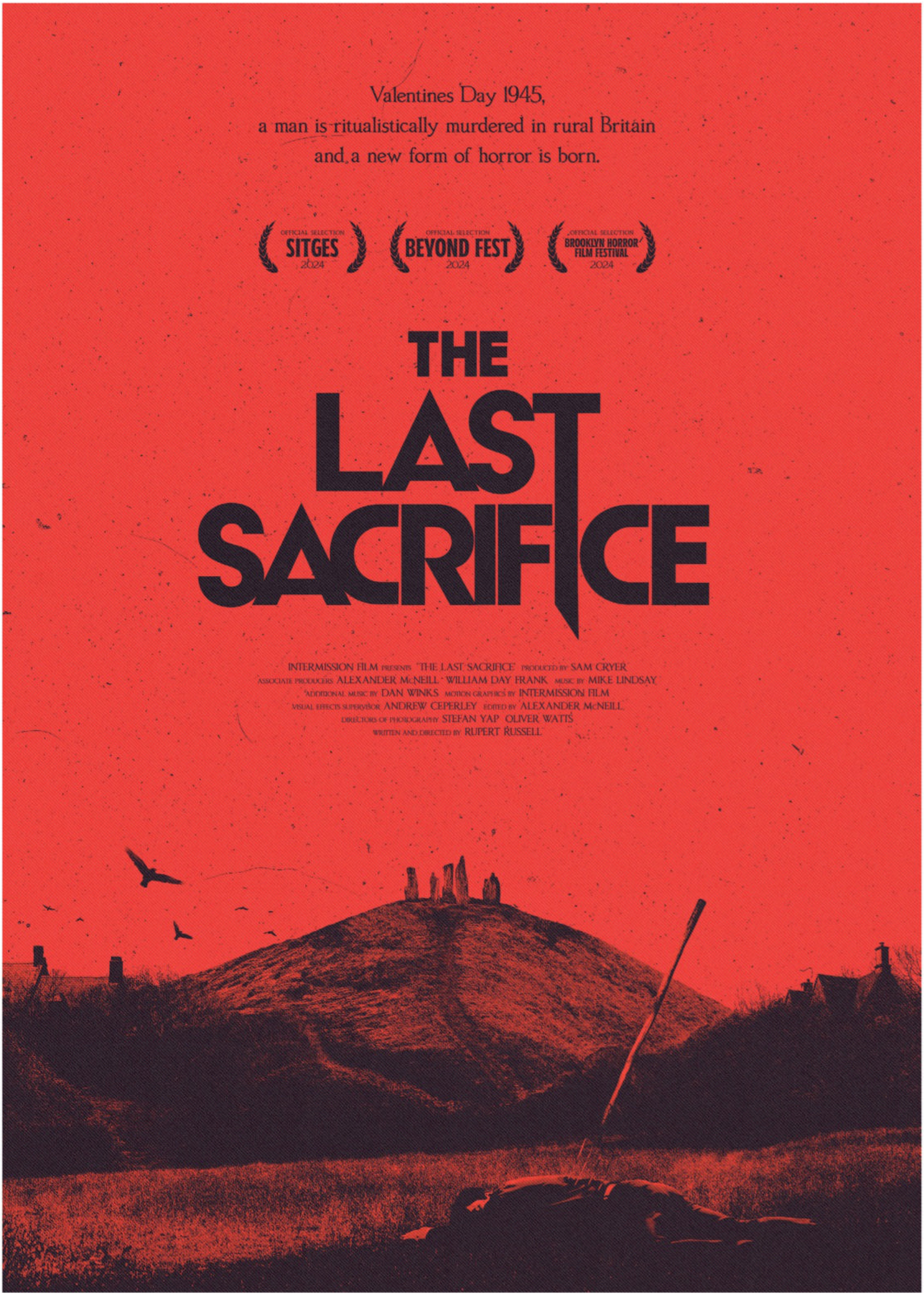
HEDGER AND DITCHER CHARLES WALTON WAS CARVED UP WITH THE TOOLS OF HIS TRADE

FABIAN of the Yard
ROBERT FABIAN

ABOVE: Friendly locals in *The Wicker Man*. **BELOW:** Sergeant Howie (Edward Woodward) and his real-life predecessor Inspector Fabian of the Yard.

Though Fabian escaped Lower Quinton with his life, he never solved the crime, which remains the oldest unsolved murder on the Warwickshire police's books. No slouch when it came to self-publicity, he subsequently embellished his retelling of the saga over subsequent volumes of his memoirs published after he had become a television star in the 1950s, adding in his own portentous encounter with a large black dog while walking on Meon Hill.[2]

The crime resurfaced again at the end of the 1960s, after the summer of love had given way to something darker



Valentines Day 1945,
a man is ritualistically murdered in rural Britain
and a new form of horror is born.

OFFICIAL SELECTION
SITGES
2024

OFFICIAL SELECTION
BEYOND FEST
2024

OFFICIAL SELECTION
BROOKLYN HORROR FILM FESTIVAL
2024

THE
LAST
SACRIFICE

INTERMISSION FILM PRESENTS "THE LAST SACRIFICE" PRODUCED BY SAM CRYER
ASSOCIATE PRODUCERS ALEXANDER McNEILL · WILLIAM DAY FRANK MUSIC BY MIKE LINDSAY
ADDITIONAL MUSIC BY DAN WINKS MOTION GRAPHICS BY INTERMISSION FILM
VISUAL EFFECTS SUPERVISOR ANDREW CEPERLEY EDITED BY ALEXANDER McNEILL
DIRECTORS OF PHOTOGRAPHY STEFAN YAP OLIVER WATTS
WRITTEN AND DIRECTED BY RUPERT RUSSELL

ABOVE LEFT: *The Wicker Man* – a premonition of life in modern Britain? **ABOVE RIGHT:** In the early Seventies, Mondo-style documentaries like *Legend of the Witches* (1971) titillated cinema audiences with glimpses of real-life occult rituals and lashings of nudity. **BELOW:** Rupert Russell, director of *The Last Sacrifice*.

and counter-cultural covens had started to pop up in such hippy hotspots as Notting Hill Gate. Donald McCormick's controversial book *Murder By Witchcraft* linked the Charles Walton case to that of the April 1943 mystery of Bella in the Wych Elm, in the neighbouring West Midlands, by way of folklorist Professor Margaret Murray, whom, the author claimed, had posited that both of these crimes were witchcraft-related. Murray had certainly inspired a revival of interest in the subject with her books *The Witch Cult in Western Europe* (1921) and *The God of Witches* (1933), inspiring occultists and novelists alike (see **FT435:30-37**).

By the time *The Wicker Man* had made its way to the big screen,[3] there had been several Mondo-style documentaries on the subject, featuring such modern practitioners as Gerald Gardner, Doreen Valiente and, especially, Alexander and Maxine Sanders of Clanricarde Gardens, W11. *Legend of The Witches* (1970), *Secret Rites* (1971), *The Power of The Witch: Real or Imaginary* (1971), treated viewers to plenty of naked rituals in woods under full Moons; or on sets that looked like they had been dressed for Charles Gray to step onto for a Hammer movie. In *The Power of The Witch*, presenter Michael Bakewell interviewed Charles Walton's niece, Edith Goode, who had discovered her uncle's mutilated body and could not explain why this dreadful fate should have befallen the shy and gentle man who brought her up. Bakewell's commentary went on to suggest that potentially murderous pre-Christian folkloric beliefs were not merely restricted to the villagers of Lower Quinton.

Blurry, pixilated memories – which the Haunted Generation of *FT* readers will recall – seeded in our fertile young minds the notion that there was a clandestine coven in every hamlet, village and town in the land. Now, thanks to the son of one of our most fortean film directors, the hellhounds are loose and Lord Summerisle is abroad once more, commanding starring roles in Rupert Russell's magnificent, feature-length documentary, *The Last Sacrifice*.

It's a complex examination of Charles Walton's murder as a microcosm for all the dark duality of the British psyche and how the divides between pagan and Christian, town and country, lawman and unruly population were crystalised in *The Wicker Man*. This visually ingenious film manages to dramatise fact using vintage Hammer and contemporary Folk Horror film clips, documentary footage and the astute commentaries of such luminaries as witchcraft expert Professor Ronald Hutton, true crime author Simon Reid, *Telegraph* film buff Tim Stanley, Atlantis Bookshop proprietor Geraldine Beskin and former Sanders coven member Janet Farrar. With a suitably atmospheric soundtrack provided by Mike Lindsay of acid folk maestros Tunng, it's an investigation as riven with unexpected twists as that undertaken by Inspector Fabian, and as dangerously compelling as Howie's journey towards his ultimate enlightenment.

MURDEROUS PRE-CHRISTIAN BELIEFS WERE NOT RESTRICTED TO LOWER QUINTON

I was delighted to be able to talk with Rupert, as deep a thinker as his father Ken, whose own forays into fantastic cinema – also based on historical record and persistent folk legend – include *The Devils* (1971), *Gothic* (1986) and *The Lair of the White Worm* (1988). A Cambridge and Harvard graduate, Rupert's previous films have tacked the worldwide crisis of democracy (*Freedom of the Wolf*, 2019), the impact of chaotic commodities markets on global crimewaves (*Price Wars*, 2021, also a best-selling book), and the animated television docuseries of the 21st century's ultimate Lord of Misrule, Donald Trump (*How The World Went Mad*, 2018).[4]

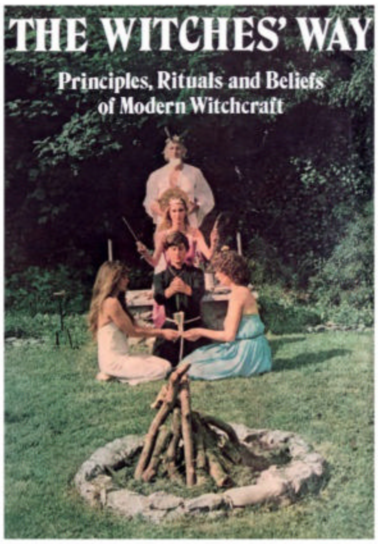
CATHI UNSWORTH: I came across the Charles Walton story while writing about Bella in the Wych Elm (**FT364:34-41**) – Margaret Murray and her witchcraft theories was the link. What was your way into it?

RUPERT RUSSELL: *The Wicker Man.* It was just one of those classic films I had never seen! I finally watched it in 2022 and I got to the scene where Howie's on the mountain going: "Can you not see? None of this is going to work!" And everyone's like: "Naw, we're just going to burn you alive anyway!" And I thought, God – that is what it feels like to live in Britain on a daily basis. I don't want to make everything about Brexit, but it felt like all the shenanigans of 2016 and what followed, all that shouting at the TV that none of these things are ever going to work being met with a collective shrug.

I spoke to Tim Stanley about it and he said: "Well you know there was this murder in 1945, in the style of *The Wicker Man?*" He knows a whole lot about British pop culture, in the Seventies in particular. And that was where it started.

We all know that true crime is a great hook for documentaries and then the more I got into it, the more I thought – there's a much bigger story here. You can do the true crime thing, fine – but that's not what's actually interesting. What's interesting is the murder and the kind of hysteria that followed and the films it inspired as a mirror to Britain and all of Britain's paranoias.

CU: I love the way you pieced together the documentary footage with the film clips and how they fed off each other. Your editor, Alexander McNeill, must be some kind of genius.



THE WITCHES' WAY
Principles, Rituals and Beliefs of Modern Witchcraft

ABOVE LEFT: Skyclad witches dance among the standing stones in The Wicker Man. **ABOVE RIGHT:** Wiccan practioners like Janet and Stewart Farrar went on to share their top tips in books such as *The Witches' Way*. **BELOW:** Alex Sanders and his coven in the 1971 film *The Power of the Witch*.

RR: Yeah, he's brilliant. He's a trailer editor and that's why I chose him. I don't like the way most documentaries are edited. You know, when you watch a true crime doc on NetFlix and they all start with some drone footage of some trees in suburban America and there's someone on the phone and its crackling…? I don't want that – everybody does that and it's so boring. So, what could be more fun? I knew there was no documentary footage of the Walton murder, but by this point I had realised there was so much archive of the *Witch* docs, plus all the Folk Horror films that I thought – why not get a trailer editor? Because that's what they do – they make films with other films. So, together, we developed a kind of visual language. And I love the way it's turned out. It feels really unique and fresh and not like anything else.

CU: It provides its own kind of ironic commentary – every time something wicked this way comes, the villagers' heads in their animal costumes pop up to suggest Other eyes are watching… And how you have constructed a Charles Walton documentary out of Hammer films, enhancing the vibe with Mike Lindsay's spooktastic soundtrack.

RR: What was interesting about the editing process was that we started with the horror movies that the murder inspired. So, the early cuts were just very roughly laying out what films we were going to have for each section. Then we realised it was actually scarier if you mixed in the *real* Britain with the horror Britain. You begin to not know what is what. For example, you're looking at real archive footage of pub life in Sixties Britain and you're like: "Is that *American Werewolf in London*? Is that *The Wicker Man*?" Especially when it's intercut. All those shots of white houses and people looking out of windows – that's actually real Britain, that's not *The Wicker Man*. So, as it continues, you are no longer sure what is documentary footage and what is horror films – and that's the whole theme that I'm interested in. How the line is blurred between this murder and these films.

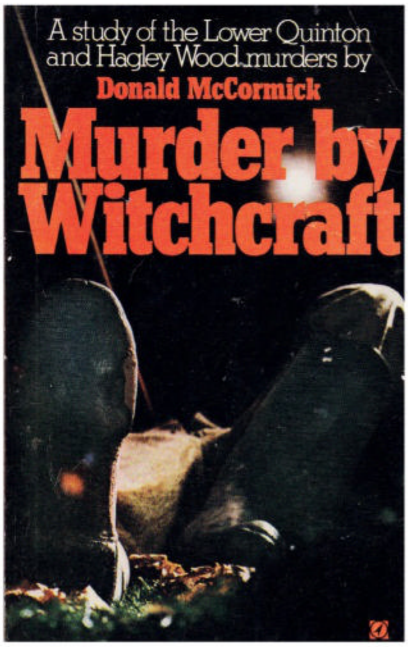
CU: I loved how you mixed up the 1970s *Witch* documentaries – and the actual interview with Walton's niece Edith – and the commentaries of Professor Ronald Hutton, our leading authority on witchcraft, who is one of the lodestones of the narrative commentary.

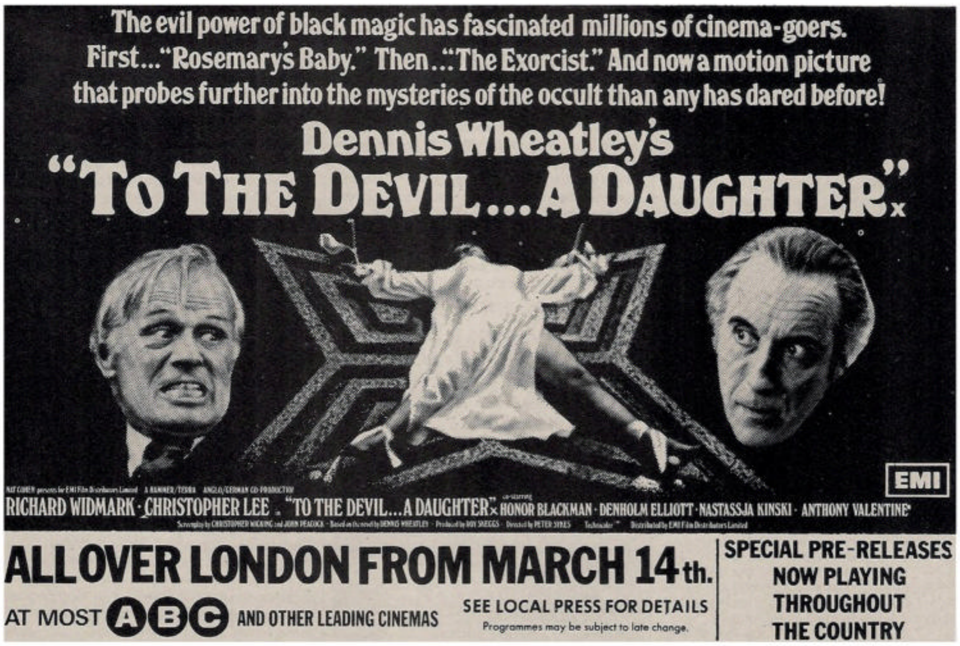
RR: I love Ronald, but the core of the documentary was actually Simon Read's book, *The Case That Foiled Fabian*. That was the first piece that I read. I then read Ronald Hutton's book *The Triumph of The Moon* and of course – it's a lot of information. So, the process of developing the film was just throwing stuff out, to be honest. Not doing Crowley, because those films have already been made, some of them by Ronald Hutton, which I was really conscious of. What worked for me was mainly going by visuals.

In the early Seventies there were a lot of documentaries made on real witches. *Legend of The Witches*, *Secret Rites*, *The Power of The Witch: Real or Imaginary*, *Witchcraft: New Fashion Old Religion* (1977) – there might have been other things here and there, but those were the big four. I started watching them at home before I even pitched the film, and what I began to realise was you could intercut them. You could take *Legend of the Witches* with them all running around the fire naked and then you could have them all running around the fire naked in *Wicker Man*. I began to visually join the dots. And they *are* Mondo docs, they're not necessarily real docs as we would understand them. More like an interface of art TV with reality TV – arthouse reality TV, maybe that's the way to think about them.

CU: And they're quite prurient, aren't they?

RR: Yeah. That's what led me to Alexander Sanders, because he's in them all; and that's also what led me to Janet Farrar, because she was in his coven for a brief moment – they fell out and went their separate ways and that's another whole story. But because Alex was sort of the


A study of the Lower Quinton and Hagley Wood murders by
Donald McCormick
Murder by Witchcraft


The evil power of black magic has fascinated millions of cinema-goers. First..."Rosemary's Baby." Then..."The Exorcist." And now a motion picture that probes further into the mysteries of the occult than any has dared before!
Dennis Wheatley's
"To The Devil...A Daughter" X
EMI
RICHARD WIDMARK · CHRISTOPHER LEE · "TO THE DEVIL...A DAUGHTER" X HONOR BLACKMAN · DENHOLM ELLIOTT · NASTASSJA KINSKI · ANTHONY VALENTINE
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SEE LOCAL PRESS FOR DETAILS
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SPECIAL PRE-RELEASES NOW PLAYING THROUGHOUT THE COUNTRY

ABOVE LEFT: Donald McCormick's book about the Lower Quinton Murder. **ABOVE RIGHT:** "You cannot underestimate the power of Dennis Wheatley and Hammer". The two icons of British horror teamed up in 1976 for *To the Devil a Daughter*. **BELOW:** 'King of the Witches' Alex Sanders gets his Tarot cards out. **BOTTOM LEFT:** Margaret Murray goes full Miss Marple. **BOTTOM:** The Hampstead Crucifixion of 1969.

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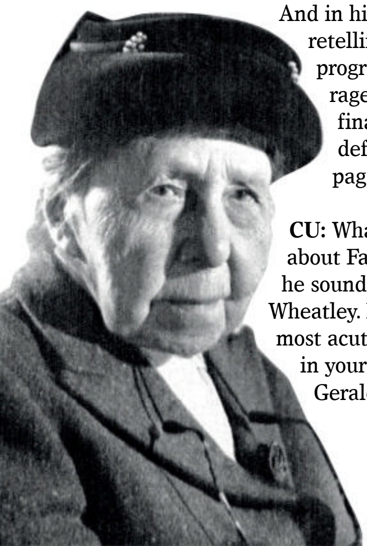
showman of the late 1960s/early 1970s and those films – I don't have proof of this, but you can imagine the people who made those Hammer films watching them. *The Power of the Witch* was on the BBC. These films were in the milieu and the imagery is quite repetitive – it seems like all of Notting Hill is running around naked! It was around, it was in the papers, and this is where I started from, looking at this culture of this period and how the influences spread.

This was colliding with the Walton murder, which had resurfaced in the late Sixties thanks to Donald McCormick's *Murder By Witchcraft* in 1968. Then there's the Hampstead Crucifixion of 1969[5] – which, by the way, was recreated in a Mondo doc called *Naked England* (1969) and they wouldn't give it to me! It's in a vault in Italy and they were just: "No." The whole thing became one of those rabbit holes and because it was so tangential to the story, we had to let it go. And, of course, the Highgate Vampire.[6] So, you have all these things swirling around…

But the Walton murder is real. There was a guy who was murdered. For the leading detective of the day, Robert Fabian, it was the only case he didn't prosecute or solve. And in his memoirs, each retelling of the tale gets progressively more outrageous, so that by his final one, Walton was definitely killed in a pagan sacrifice.

CU: What's interesting about Fabian is how much he sounds like Dennis Wheatley. I think one of the most acute observations in your film was from Geraldine Beskin, of the Atlantis bookshop, when she said: "You cannot underestimate the power of Dennis Wheatley and Hammer." As a child of the Seventies, I grew up believing there was a coven within every community in the land – and I did live right out in the country, in circumstances not unlike those of Lower Quinton. I did know someone who was exorcised for listening to Kiss records in Norfolk in the 1980s.



RR: There's another frustrating archival search I had – because it was in the papers, there's pictures of it, but the original recording was either lost or wiped. Dennis Wheatley actually went on a chat show, head-to-head with Alex Sanders. And here's where Margaret Murray comes back into it, because Wheatley actually borrowed from Murray, as we've put in the film – the whole idea of there being 13 witches in a coven comes from Murray. And she's giving this academic basis to this, she's writing the original Witch Cult material and Wheatley is drawing off it.

CU: I love the footage you have of her, where she does look rather like Margaret Rutherford playing Miss Marple. Because, if McCormick's narrative is to be believed, she did act like Miss Marple, going down to the Midlands and stirring it all up.

RR: All these people could have whole documentaries in their own right. I mean, Margaret Murray is fascinating. She couldn't decide whether she liked witchcraft or not. She wrote the preface to one of Gerald Gardner's books [*Witchcraft Today*, 1954] and they became friends. But, according to Ronald Hutton, she also claimed to have put curses on people herself! So, I don't quite know what was going on in her mind. That was the only archive footage available of her and we were quite lucky to get that. Same with Gardner. I was so frustrated because I had so many brilliant news clips written contemporaneously that have just been lost. Same with the Highgate Vampire. They were on every week on local TV talking about that.

CU: My greatest takeaway from your film was that Highgate Vampire hunter David Farrant morphed into Satanic hippy cult leader Johnny Alucard in *Dracula AD 1972*.

RR: You can see it all there. And it's a bit of a segue from our main story, but I loved how it was like a microcosm of the whole film. Because I went in thinking David Farrant inspired *Dracula AD 1972*, but then [author and Hammer historian] Jonathan Rigby was like, "Well, actually, there was a Hammer film before that called *Taste The Blood of Dracula* (1970), set in Highgate Cemetery." So maybe that was what Farrant was watching, before he went in! The lines of causality go in every direction in that story.

CU: Eyewitness Janet Farrar describes the Highgate Vampire in your film as "a collective summoning" – as if we needed *Dracula AD 1972* to actually exist and so conjured him out of the Jungian subconscious!

RR: Yeah, totally. And that applies to Walton as well. If the villagers really believed he was a witch, then maybe he was.

CU: You've tapped into something really potent here, I think, about how the seeming idyll of the countryside becomes a dangerous place to be. I think this is something that has divided the British psyche since the Industrial Revolution, when us peasants were forced off the land and into the factory.

RR: Definitely. It's the whole metaphor of the Enemy Within and how I view the film as showing a mirror to how we project our paranoias and our fears. When the Americans make Folk Horror, they always go abroad. *American Werewolf in London*; in *Midsommar* they go to Sweden, even in the *Wicker Man* remake, even though it's technically on an American Pacific island, Nic Cage gets on a plane which is symbolic of leaving America. Whereas the British Folk Horror is all about how your local town is run by an aristocrat using voodoo or old pagan rites to manipulate the dumb peasantry.

Class is a huge part of it – if you remember in *The Plague of the Zombies*, the zombies are mineworkers who don't want to work in the mine, so the Squire uses voodoo to force them to work for him. There's those great shots of all the whipping and everything.

We had lots more commentary on British society in earlier edits, but then we decided to come back and focus more on the Walton murder because it's like a kind of gestalt – the audience can connect the dots themselves. It could have been two competing films at one point, so we decided to refocus on the murder and then just have a sprinkling of broader themes. British people know what Britain's like.

CU: The Folk Horror movement has been nurtured within the pages of *Fortean Times* and I think stems from the reawakening effect of Rob Young's *Electric Eden* book of 2010 on what we like to call 'The Haunted Generation'. What do you make of the contemporary films featured within yours compared to the Hammer classics?

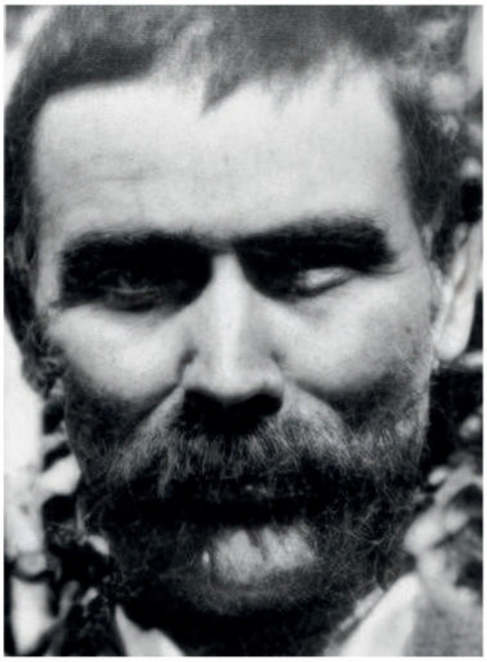
RR: It's interesting; our interviewees were almost all stuck in the Seventies and wouldn't tolerate anything after 1975. Not being a Folk Horror obsessive and coming more recently to the genre, I loved a lot of the recent stuff, like Alex Garland's *Men* (2022). I thought Rory Kinnear playing all the different versions of awful British men was just genius. How weird they are, creepy and scary, in a way that's uniquely British – and how one actor was able to tap into all of those characteristics. And then Dennis – sorry, I mean Ben – Wheatley's *Kill List* (2011) is just an incredible film, period. What he did that was so brilliant was tapping into the imagery of those earlier films, especially *The Wicker Man*. So, it felt very believable and very modern without seeming like a costume party or someone raiding the dressing-up box. This really could be the West Midlands. I think these films speak to Britain's never-ending identity crisis. Folk Horror is asking who are we, really? What's the dark underbelly that's being repressed?

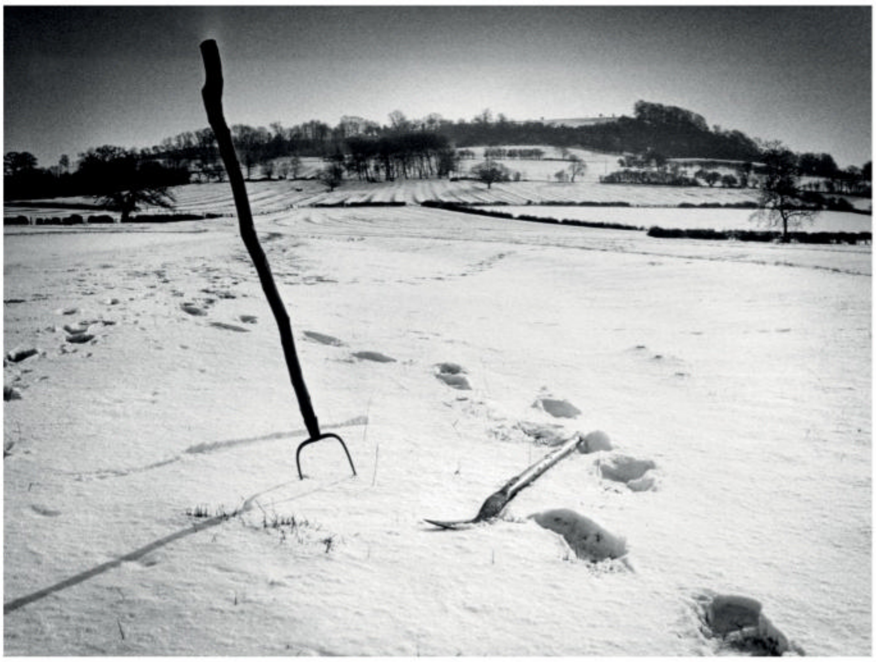
> "THERE WAS A HAMMER FILM CALLED *TASTE THE BLOOD OF DRACULA* SET IN HIGHGATE CEMETERY"

LEFT: David Farrant, fearless vampire hunter of Highgate Cemetery. **BELOW:** Christopher Neame as Johnny Alucard in Hammer's *Dracula AD 1972*.

DELLA FARRANT

ALBUM / ALAMY STOCK PHOTO





TRINITY MIRROR / MIRRORPIX / ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

ABOVE LEFT: Charles Walton, killed on Valentine's Day 1945 with the tools of his trade. **ABOVE RIGHT:** The crime scene at Meon Hill and murder weapons, photographed in February 1991. **BELOW:** Christopher Lee as Lord Summerisle in *The Wicker Man* – "There's a dark side to the British aristocracy."

CU: So, do you have a theory on what happened to Charles Walton?

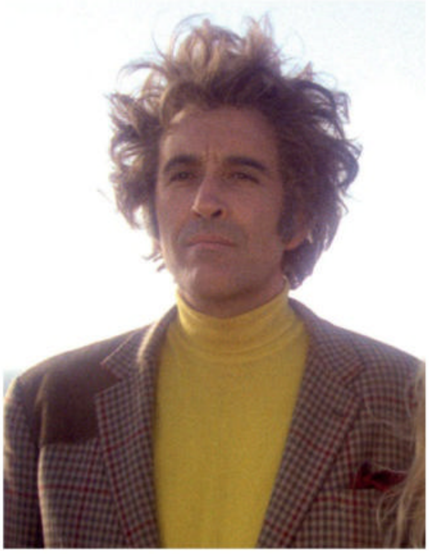
RR: Well, what's so interesting is there's no evidence for *any* of the theories. You can go back to the police reports as I did. I went to the National Archives and read everything. The problem that Fabian had was that there was no evidence beyond the crime scene. They had all these theories about money. Walton was rumoured to have all this money, but they never found any of it. They thought his pocket watch might be worth something, but that was never found, not even after a nationwide search.[7] There was a focus on the nearby Italian Prisoner of War camp: they interviewed every single person in it, but there was nothing there – because what motive would they have had? The whole problem with the murder was the motive. They couldn't find one and that was what was so frustrating about it.

Alfred Potter [the farmer Walton worked for on an ad hoc basis and on whose land he died] was lying, I think that's pretty certain.[8] Either Potter knew who the murderer was, was involved in the murder or most likely was the murderer. But what was his motive? He had a heifer that died the day before the murder – that was something they latched onto, especially when you consider the fact that the last witch murder in the UK happened down the road 70 years earlier. Ann Tennant…[9]

CU: Who was supposed to be Walton's great grandmother and also got murdered with a pitchfork…

RR: …by James Haywood. They're not related, but she was killed over the death of a pig, so they are related that way – it is a connection the police made in 1951. To me, that's the best theory that has been put forward. There's no evidence for it though. Just as there's no evidence that Potter thought Walton was a witch. There's no evidence that the rest of the townsfolk thought he was a witch either. We don't know why this heifer died, or whether Potter blamed Walton for it. But it's a very striking coincidence; that's how I feel about it. It would be one thing if Ann Tennant was murdered 300 miles away. But the fact is, it was just down the road and it was quite well reported. The book by the Reverend John Harvey Bloom, *Folklore, Old Customs and Superstitions in Shakespeare Land*, references both the black dog story and the Ann Tennant story. We cut this from the film because it was too circumstantial – but in the introduction to his book, Bloom says: "I want to thank my main source for this material, a Mr FS Potter." I don't know if FS Potter is related to Alfred Potter, but we could speculate. This is a small part of Warwickshire – how many Potters are there? It's a common name, but what does that say? Maybe the Potters were into folkloric thinking or magic. But even if they were related, what would that prove?

"NOBODY ACTED LIKE THERE WAS A DEMENTED KILLER ABOUT. NO ONE SEEMED TO CARE"



The idea that folklore is common knowledge is one of Ronald Hutton's claims. So, the idea that Walton was a witch is plausible and maybe even likely, but we don't have any proof – which is one of the reasons the murder is so interesting. There's a vacuum there that you can bring your own prejudices and paranoias to – that's what I like about it.

CU: It's the idea that the community would deliberately cover up the crime and mock the lawman that has the most resonance with *The Wicker Man*.

RR: Yeah, and that's quite well recorded by Fabian. Even in the original crime reports he does say that. He arrives there thinking that it's going to be super easy. "I've got 450 suspects, everyone knows everyone, how hard is it going to be?" But it turns out no one talks. The great detective is defeated by the small English village and that again invites paranoia. Because that then opens it up from "what was the motive of the killer?" to "what is the motive of the community?"

Ronald Hutton makes the point that nobody acted like there was a demented killer about. No one seemed to care! So, what's the inference from that? That everyone knew who did it and they knew the motive – and they didn't feel it applied to them, which was

ABOVE: Dark rituals from Norman Warren's 1976 film *Satan's Slave* repurposed by Rupert Russell in *The Last Sacrifice*.

true. There wasn't a whole spate of pitchfork murders. But in 1945 there's no way to know that – unless you knew who had done it and why.

CU: Yeah – and to not be scared by the horrendous murder of an old man.

RR: Quite. So that's the Pandora's Box of Paranoias, once you open that up. It's no longer why was Alfred Potter lying, but why is the community lying? I think the truth of it is we are never going to know – and I love that. The mystery of it, as we say in the film, is the mystery of Britain itself. Identity isn't a solvable case. Britain's identity is an ongoing process with plenty of history and many interconnected ley-lines. Britain's always had this issue. It flared up around the end of Empire and it flared up in the wake of the financial crisis and around Brexit, and it's still going on. Are we going to send troops into Ukraine? And why? Are we a part of Christianity, which is a global religion, are we a part of the EU, or are we Fortress Island, Stonehenge, Wicker Man pagan people?

Boris Johnson styled himself as a bit of a Lord Summerisle. The buffoonish aristocrat – that is a deep archetype that the Hammer films really pinpointed. There's a dark side to the British aristocracy. It can be flamboyant and eccentric and in that way kind of disarming. But then there's the darkness underneath that of power and control and deference. As Jonathan Rigby said – it was a great line but we had to cut it out of the film – "The British people love to look up to other people, to the Queen, to their betters."

CU: There is a sting at the end of this tale. I don't want to put out any plot-spoilers, but suffice to say – don't leave the cinema until you have sat through the credits. I really didn't see that one coming!

RR: That was a story that I just found in a newspaper in the British Library and thought: "What is this?" I showed it to a friend of mine that evening, saying: "You're never gonna believe what I just found…" And he said: "I know this person." He put me in touch so we could record the story and put it in there, after the end credits. What more can I say?

Find screening and distribution news about *The Last Sacrifice* on Instagram @thelastsacrifice_film_

NOTES

1 Shaffer's screenplay was adapted from actor and author David Pinner's horror novel *Ritual* (1967).

2 Fabian's first memoir, *Fabian of the Yard* (1950), formed the basis of the eponymous TV series which ran from November 1954 to February 1956. A subsequent retelling of the Walton story, featuring the legend of the black dogs of Meon Hill, appeared in his third memoir, *Anatomy of a Crime* (1970). The idea that as a young ploughboy Walton had seen one of these hellhounds on nine consecutive nights, accompanied by a headless woman in black silks – apparitions that portended the death of his sister – was suggested by the Rev John Harvey Bloom's *Folklore, Old Customs and Superstitions in Shakespeare Land* (1925), a book given to Fabian by his colleague, Stratford CID Detective Superintendent Alec Spooner, while he was in Lower Quinton.

3 British Lion, the studio that financed *The Wicker Man*, was bought out by EMI Films during production and studio executives were not happy with the initial cut. Robin Hardy was asked to remove scenes and the footage was lost – allegedly ending up under the M4 motorway, according to Alex Cox's *Moviedrome* introduction to the film in 1988. Fortunately, one complete copy had been sent to Roger Corman in 1973 and from this, the film was able to be restored in 1979. For the full story of its turbulent past, see Studio Canal's 50th Anniversary boxed set.

4 See rupertrussell.com for more.

5 Joseph deHavilland, 30, was found crucified – but alive – on Hampstead Heath in July 1968. The Hungarian interior decorator had persuaded friends to drive eight-inch nails through his hands in a case that set a legal precedent about whether a person can consent to be injured. Defence solicitor David Jacobs – who masterminded Liberace's successful libel case against the *Daily Mirror* in 1959 – was found hanged in mysterious circumstances shortly after the trial, in December 1968.

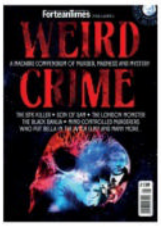
6 David Farrant made his first public claim about seeing "a grey figure" in Highgate Cemetery in a letter to the *Hampstead and Highgate Express* on 6 February 1970. Sean Manchester contended this was a vampire and thus, a four-decade feud as diabolical as that between Dracula and Von Helsing, was born.

7 Throughout the many retellings of the tale, Walton's pocket watch transformed into an heirloom that contained within it a 'witch glass' or scrying mirror.

8 Alfred Potter was Fabian's lead suspect, "an extremely cunning individual" according to his contemporaneous police notes. Potter changed his story about the heifer in what appeared to be an attempt to engineer an alibi for the time of Walton's murder.

9 80-year-old Ann (or Anne) Tennant – whom the *Daily Mirror* identified as Walton's aunt in an article from 13 February 1954 – was murdered by pitchfork for alleged witchcraft by John (or James) Heywood in the nearby village of Old Compton in 1875. Haywood was found not guilty for reasons of insanity and spent the rest of his life in Broadmoor.

CATHI UNSWORTH is the author of six pop-cultural noir novels either directly based on or influenced by strange and unsolved real crimes, including *That Old Black Magic* (Bella in the Wych Elm and 'Blitz Witch' Helen Duncan), *Without The Moon* (the Blackout Ripper) and *Bad Penny Blues* (the Thames Towpath Murders). She lives in London, and gives frequent talks and walks for The Sohemian Society (sohemiansociety.com/).



For much more on the Lower Quinton Murder, Bella in the Witch Elm and other strange cases, order your copy of *Fortean Times Presents... Weird Crime*, on sale now.

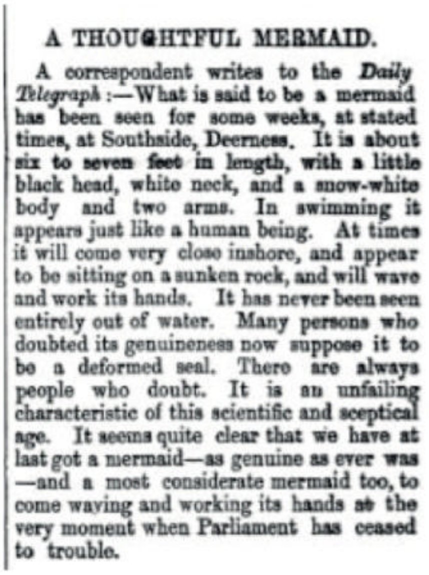
What was the Deerness Mermaid?

For nearly 20 years in the late 19th century a 'mermaid' was a regular visitor to Deerness on Orkney, and the sheer volume of witness testimony makes this one of the best-documented of fortean mysteries. But what was the Deerness Mermaid? SIMON YOUNG rounds up the usual and unusual suspects...

In mid-June 1892, several hundred Orcadians tried and happily failed to kill a mermaid. The story behind this extraordinary episode (see **FT368:54-55**) is quickly told. A strange marine creature had, for a number of years, been seen off Deerness on Orkney and a naturalist from Glasgow had offered £200 for the creature alive, or £100 for its dead body. [1] This was a huge amount in Orkney at the end of the 19th century. So it was that on the weekend of the 18-19 June, "a great number of people proceeded to Deerness from Kirkwall… Some were armed with guns and rifles". After a series of misses, a Mr Reid was taken out in a boat on Tuesday 21 June. "In a short time Mr Reid fired, and wounded [the creature], after which it went out to sea a short distance, and then returned and sank… Boats were engaged dragging the spot."[2] But the next morning the Deerness Mermaid was back, apparently no worse for a bullet, and "was seen in its usual place, swimming backwards and forwards. It is only supposed to have been stunned by the shot." [3]

The Deerness Mermaid seems to have arrived on Orkney in the late 1880s, but only a local farmer noticed. It first appeared in the newspapers in August 1890. The farmer's neighbours had chaffed him about 'his' mermaid and he had taken them to a cliff top to watch this prodigy splashing around. [4] One of the neighbours blabbed to a journalist. From there the 'mermaid' quickly became, *via* newsprint and clippers, famous throughout the British Empire. In the 1890s its life, as shared in the media, resembled a soap opera with a climactic end-of-season event most years: in 1892 it was 'killed' by the cursed Reid; in 1893 it had a baby; in 1894 it starred in a musical; and in 1895 it was seen with the sea serpent.[5] The last known sighting came in 1899. [6]

Return from Fishing, Orkney



A THOUGHTFUL MERMAID.

A correspondent writes to the *Daily Telegraph*:—What is said to be a mermaid has been seen for some weeks, at stated times, at Southside, Deerness. It is about six to seven feet in length, with a little black head, white neck, and a snow-white body and two arms. In swimming it appears just like a human being. At times it will come very close inshore, and appear to be sitting on a sunken rock, and will wave and work its hands. It has never been seen entirely out of water. Many persons who doubted its genuineness now suppose it to be a deformed seal. There are always people who doubt. It is an unfailing characteristic of this scientific and sceptical age. It seems quite clear that we have at last got a mermaid—as genuine as ever was—and a most considerate mermaid too, to come waving and working its hands at the very moment when Parliament has ceased to trouble.

ABOVE: Orkney fisherfolk seen in an old postcard. **LEFT:** An account of the Deerness Mermaid – which records that "in swimming it appears like a human being" – from *The Star* (Guernsey), 21 August 1890.

Scores of people watched the creature before it disappeared: many tourists coming specially to Orkney to make its acquaintance.[7] We have, as a result, a number of descriptions based on what amounts to thousands of hours of observation.[8] We are emphatically not talking about a fairy glimpsed in the gloaming or Nessie lifting its head a few inches out of the water once annually. This is among the best documented unexplained anomalies in history.

ALLAN WRIGHT / ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

ABOVE: Sunrise seen from the cliffs at Deerness, Orkney, where the famous 'mermaid' was regularly seen from the late 1880s to 1899. **BELOW:** A 15th century carved stone mermaid in Clonfert Cathedral, Ireland; the Deerness Mermaid apparently differed in appearance from such traditional representations.

DESCRIPTIONS

So what did this 'mermaid' look like? Well, not very like a mermaid: at least not the mermaids that we are used to from Disney and mediæval churches. The accounts describe an animal with, for the most part, seal-like features. It had a large, dark, bullet-shaped head with a human-like face, and its head was compared among other things to a polar bear's. More of this below. Its most striking feature was perhaps its un-seal-like long neck.[9] Its body was described as being five to 10 feet (1.5 to 3m) in length, with a dark back and white neck, chest and belly (the underside mottled in one description). There was some kind of hair: "The hair is black; not long but very abundant, as is seen when the creature shakes its head on coming to the surface after a long dive." [10] One report mentioned, meanwhile, a mane-like growth or a ridge of dark hair running down its back.[11]

It swam like a human, propelling itself with forelimbs – some three feet (90cm) long – or moving around on its back, "the arms set a little lower down than a human being".[12] It was accompanied one year by a smaller individual, presumed to be its baby, suggesting that it was a mature female and that there was a breeding population somewhere. It would frequently stay under the water for five minutes or more and was seen to eat fish and eels. It dove, from a floating position, head down "but doubled up as it dived, so that the lower part could not be seen very well".[13] It also sank into the water: "Its way was to slowly sink out of sight, as if back downwards; its face being the last part of it to disappear." [14] It was more likely to come out in the sun than in dismal weather. And another thing that seems important: it did not live continually at Deerness, but visited every summer, arriving between March and May and disappearing as autumn began.

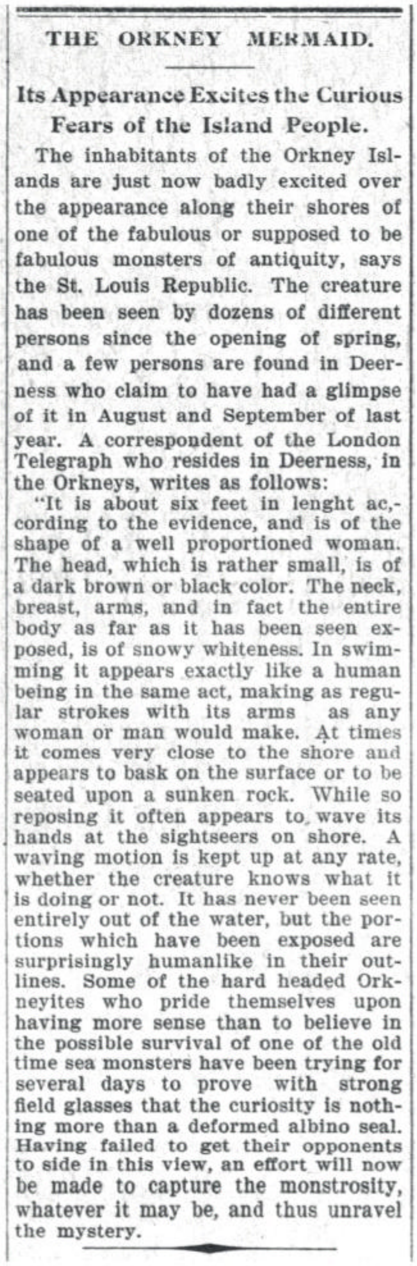
The 'Mermaid' quickly became famous throughout the British Empire

DIRK HUTH / WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

There are then a series of less consistently noted features, where we might doubt the quality of the information. One witness described its skin as being scaly or fish-like in appearance, rather than the smooth skin characteristic of seals.[15] The creature was said to have a tail, shaped like a fan.[16] Usually the tail was not seen, because the creature bobbed up and down in the ocean or swam on its back: note the details of its unusual dive motion above. Two witnesses who saw mother and child near to the shore described them as being like "monster Newfoundland dogs" when seen from the side: there seems to have been a degree of fear involved in this account as the witnesses ran! [17] One report was emphatic that there were "mamma or breasts, which are distinctly seen when it raises itself

DAVID NOTON PHOTOGRAPHY / ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

ABOVE: Taracliff Bay, Deerness; a perfect spot for mermaids? **BELOW LEFT:** A report concerning the Mermaid from the *Honolulu Advertiser* (Hawaii), 14 October 1896. **BELOW:** A typical 'Feejee Mermaid'.



THE ORKNEY MERMAID.

Its Appearance Excites the Curious Fears of the Island People.

The inhabitants of the Orkney Islands are just now badly excited over the appearance along their shores of one of the fabulous or supposed to be fabulous monsters of antiquity, says the St. Louis Republic. The creature has been seen by dozens of different persons since the opening of spring, and a few persons are found in Deerness who claim to have had a glimpse of it in August and September of last year. A correspondent of the London Telegraph who resides in Deerness, in the Orkneys, writes as follows:

"It is about six feet in lenght ac,-cording to the evidence, and is of the shape of a well proportioned woman. The head, which is rather small, is of a dark brown or black color. The neck, breast, arms, and in fact the entire body as far as it has been seen exposed, is of snowy whiteness. In swimming it appears exactly like a human being in the same act, making as regular strokes with its arms as any woman or man would make. At times it comes very close to the shore and appears to bask on the surface or to be seated upon a sunken rock. While so reposing it often appears to, wave its hands at the sightseers on shore. A waving motion is kept up at any rate, whether the creature knows what it is doing or not. It has never been seen entirely out of the water, but the portions which have been exposed are surprisingly humanlike in their outlines. Some of the hard headed Orkneyites who pride themselves upon having more sense than to believe in the possible survival of one of the old time sea monsters have been trying for several days to prove with strong field glasses that the curiosity is nothing more than a deformed albino seal. Having failed to get their opponents to side in this view, an effort will now be made to capture the monstrosity, whatever it may be, and thus unravel the mystery.

half-way out of the sea, and when it swims or floats on its back".[18] No report talks of any noise, except a late description where the mermaid "disported itself for hours on the surface of the water, waving its long arms, snorting, blowing and making a loud noise".[19]

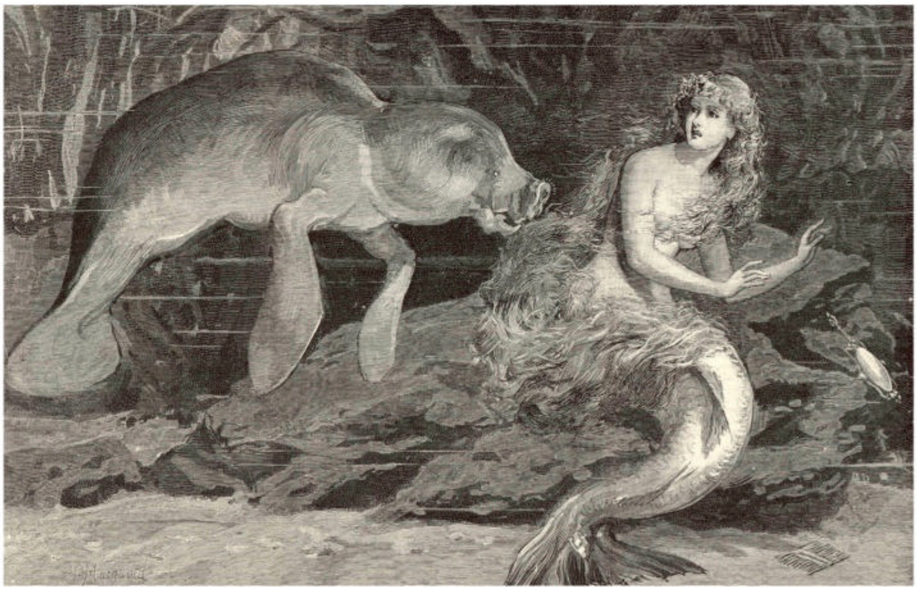
There are three other points that are conspicuous by their absence or that can be deduced. First, the Deerness Mermaid is never described as going on land by witnesses.[20] If this creature did stretch out and bask in the sun, it did so, modestly, when its human neighbours were not watching. Some of the uncertainties about its tail come down to the lack of observed land visits. Second, whiskers (so typical with seals) are never mentioned. I think we can certainly rule out, on this basis, the bearded seal with its glorious facial hair. Third – and this could be entirely my own imagination having read too many digitally yellowing news reports – the Deerness Mermaid seems to have been a diva. It enjoyed attention. It did not, at the very least, shun human company: even after being shot at. In fact, it was so frequently seen by local crofters that one suspects there was a reciprocal curiosity.[21]

LOCAL KNOWLEDGE

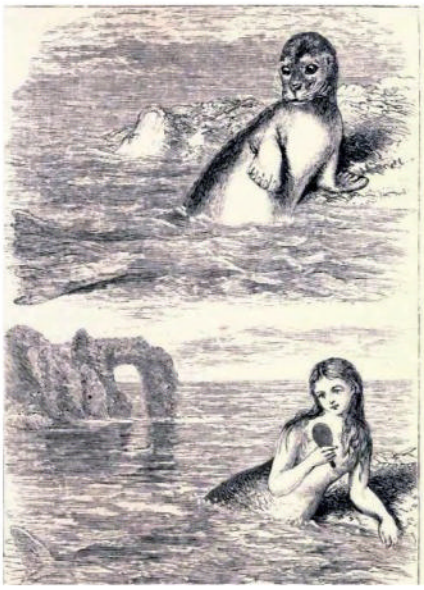
Before we get down to some candidates, let's acknowledge that hundreds of Orcadians saw the 'mermaid' and did not recognise it as a known type. Orkney was a seafaring community where crofters on shore and fishermen out in the bay had an intimate knowledge of the sea. These were not day-trippers or city traders at the seaside in Margate for the afternoon. When locals said "they have never seen anything in the sea to which they can compare" the Deerness Mermaid, they should be taken seriously.[22] Likewise, when "the people of Deerness, who have watched it closely for years, say it has few if any of the seal's habits, and maintain it swims like a human being", we should take them at their word.[23] If this had been a one-off sighting, there would be wriggle room. We might wonder about unusual atmospheric conditions, drunkenness or (an old favourite) seaweed stuck to a seal's head. But many of the witnesses saw the mermaid again and again and again over the best part of a decade.

Why 'mermaid'? The press loved the word 'mermaid', of course, because it sold newspapers and gave such enticing headlines as "The Mermaid Shot" and "The Mermaid Still Alive". Admittedly, the Deerness Mermaid had little in common with the typical image of a mermaid today. But there was some wriggle room here too. In the 1870s manatees had been sold to British aquariums as 'mermaids' and these 'mermaids' were visited by tens of thousands. There were also all those grotesque 'mermaids' exhibited in British fairgrounds in the 19th century – monkeys

ALAN FRISWELL



CHRONICLE / ALAMY STOCK PHOTO



ABOVE LEFT: A mermaid surprised by a manatee, a common mermaid suspect, in an illustration from 1899. **ABOVE RIGHT:** "Seal and Mermaid" compared in a Victorian engraving. **BELOW:** A common or harbour seal, an animal that the Orkney islanders should have had no difficulty identifying.

sewn onto a cod, usually (see **FT254:35, 46-49**). The result was that 'mermaid' had become more plastic in the imagination by the 1890s than it had been in, say, the 1790s. As for Orcadians, they could very naturally refer to a mysterious seal-like being in the water as a mermaid. After all, in parts of Ireland and northern Scotland (including the Northern Isles) there was the tradition of the Selkie, a sea woman who has a seal-like appearance in the sea and who appears like a woman on land. The Deerness Mermaid fits quite neatly into that folklore category.[24]

CANDIDATES: MANATEES

In the 1890s one candidate pulled out to explain the Deerness Mermaid was a creature we have already mentioned, the manatee. The manatees are large, aquatic mammals known for their gentle, slow-moving nature and their ability to swim using their powerful tails and paddle-like flippers. Manatees are to be found in shallow African and American coastal waters and rivers, primarily in tropical and subtropical regions. It is plausible that some early European 'mermaid' encounters in the New World were with American manatees. Problem: manatees have never been definitely recorded in British or Irish waters. But some other mammals from their traditional American eco-systems have made it across, following the Gulf Stream.[25] It is not inconceivable then that a manatee could have arrived in chilly Orkney and spent a few seasons amazing locals.

The primary reason for thinking that the Deerness mermaid was a manatee is the reference to its breasts. Of sea-dwelling creatures only two animals – the dugong and the manatee – have breasts in the same position as human beings. And even Charles Fort would not, surely, countenance a Dugong off the coast of Scotland! [26]

Problem: Manatees have never been definitely recorded in British waters

But did the Deerness Mermaid really have breasts high on its body? Only according to one admittedly authoritative account. Other factors also point to a manatee, including the creature's large size and its long flippers. But there are, as well, a series of important differences. Manatees are uniformly grey: not black and white. They do not hunt eels or fish: very rarely, they eat dead fish. And while a manatee might just have turned up in Orkney, I can imagine no circumstances in which a manatee would commute backwards and forwards across the Atlantic for a decade; or are we to imagine that a lost manatee went further south in Britain during the winter?

CANDIDATES: SEALS

A much more credible candidate – as was recognised at the time – would be a seal of some type. Common seals and grey seals were smaller than the Deerness Mermaid. They were also familiar to locals. But there are more exotic breeds including the bearded and the hooded seal. The bearded and hooded seal are both of about the right size and they dwell in the North Atlantic: crucially, they were not so familiar to Orkney folk. [27]

If we consider a manatee coming from the Caribbean, then we can certainly consider a bearded or hooded seal com-

C HOLLINGSWORTH / FLICKR / CREATIVE COMMONS

MICHAEL HAFERKAMP / WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

ABOVE: The bearded seal would have been an unlikely visitor to Deerness, and surely at least one witness would have mentioned the animal's glorious whiskers. **BELOW:** A recent Royal Mail stamp pictured a Selkie, a mythical shapeshifter that has a seal-like appearance in the sea, but appears as a woman on land.

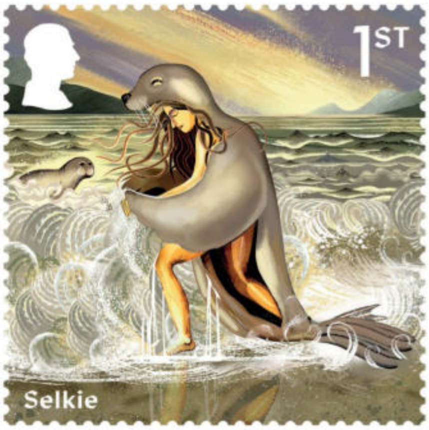
ing down from Iceland: though wouldn't a bigger ocean seal be more likely to turn up in the winter than in the summer?[28] These two breeds eat fish and eels, of course. They also spend a great deal of time in the water (more than manatees). The only Orkney naturalist I know of who, in the 1890s, gave his opinion (and who had presumably seen the mermaid) suggested a hooded seal.[29]

However, here, too, these arctic and subarctic seals do not, in some respects, work for the Deerness Mermaid. Most importantly, they do not have the distinctive elongated neck consistently mentioned in the Deerness accounts. The Deerness head is small like a seal's, but bullet-like or like a pear running down towards the body.[30] A key quotation: "The head is large and tapering towards the mouth, resembling in shape that of a polar bear": the point is, I think, that the head does not run into the body in a neckless way, as a seal's appears to.[31] See also: "The head and face are human-like, only that the jaws are described as protruding considerably, so that seen in profile, the face is like that of a pug dog or ape than a human being's." [32]

This corresponds to no seal that I know. Nor do either the bearded or hooded seal tend to swim on their back – no seal, apparently, swims regularly on its back – or use forelimbs for propulsion like a human swimmer. As noted above, no account mentions the glorious frontal whiskers of the bearded seal and the white-below-brown-above patterning matches neither the bearded nor the hooded seal.

If someone held a gun to my head and demanded my best guess to the Deerness mystery, I'd give a politer version of this from a 19th-century observer – "some species of seal, but abnormal".[33] Still here, too, there are problems. Seals can cross breed, which may have produced a unique specimen. But the Deerness Mermaid had a merkid apparently: typically, seal hybrids do not successfully reproduce.

I have struggled with various guides to whittle the list of candidates down



ROYAL MAIL

Another possibility is that the Deerness Mermaid was a seal of a known breed, but one with a peculiar body. The flippers (if that is what they were) and its neck both seem to have been out of proportion to a typical seal's body. We might speculate that a seal was born with unusual proportions in the way that some humans are born with six fingers or a third nipple. These unusual proportions meant that the Deerness Mermaid had to develop atypical swimming behaviour.[34] Could an unusual body even explain its unusual migratory habits? A *lusus naturæ*, according to this hypothesis, struggled through to adulthood where it was observed in Deerness for several summers…

CONCLUSION

The reader will have noticed a growing number of 'perhapses' in the last paragraphs. I am not a naturalist and I have no special knowledge of sea creatures (other than mythical ones). I have struggled with various guides to whittle the list of candidates down. I now, with some relief, throw the question open to you, hoping to have my outline corrected and improved upon. What, dear reader, was the Deerness mermaid? Is this a manatee, a seal (normal or atypical), or do we have here a sea mammal that does not appear in our textbooks, but that lived and that perhaps still lives somewhere in the North Atlantic? This being could be an unrecognised species of seal; or it could be another type of sea mammal entirely. Say it very quietly. It might even be the prototype of a certain legendary being, the mermaid… But no, no, that way madness lies! Back to Deerness and the facts (confusing as they are).

NOTES

[1] There is no contemporary secondary literature on the mermaid that I have been able to find. For the Glasgow naturalist "The Orkney Mermaid: Too Bashful to Show Itself", *Glasgow Evening Press*, 20 Jun 1892, p.5; The Orkney 'Mermaid', *Aberdeen Press*, 21 Jun 1892, p.4. Note that £200 would be about £20,000 in today's money.

[2] "The Orkney 'Mermaid' Shot", *Aberdeen Press*, 22 Jun 1892, p.5.

[3] "The Mermaid Still Alive", *Edinburgh Evening*

UNUKORNO / FLICKR / CREATIVE COMMONS

ABOVE: Grey seals, like these ones photographed at on the beach at Birsay, are a common sight in Orkney. **BELOW:** An item from the *McIvor Times and Rodney Advertiser* (Australia), 25 August 1892, shows how far the story of the Deerness Mermaid travelled, and states that the creature was "supposed to be a deformed seal".

News, 24 Jun 1892, p.3.

4 "The Orkney Mermaid", *Orkney Herald*, 3 Sep 1890, p.4.

5 "The Deerness Mermaid", *Dundee Evening Telegraph*, 22 Jun 1893, p.3; "Kirkwall Amateur Christmas Entertainment", *Orkney Herald*, 19 Dec 1894, p.5; W Henry Menmuir, "An Account of the Deerness Mermaid and Sea-Serpent", *Orkney Herald*, 14 Aug 1895, p.8: "While watching the mermaid we noticed a dark object, about 100 yards further out, swimming at a great rate in a southerly direction. Fixing my glass upon it, I saw that it was undoubtedly the much-talked-of sea serpent."

6 "The now famous…", *Orkney Herald*, 19 Jul 1899, p.5. The national press had long since got bored of the story and the local press showed signs of tiring. Perhaps the creature continued to be seen after 1899 but was no longer newsworthy.

7 E.g. Menmuir, "An Account", shares his viewing with "a man from Natal".

8 I've put together a source pamphlet on the case with almost 25,000 words.

9 One author seemed to suggest that this was an impression rather than reality because the animal swam on its back so often. Jas. Stewart, "Deerness Mermaid", *The Scotsman*, 29 Jun 1895, p.11: back-swimming "gives it the appearance of having a very long neck and a small head, and it has frequently been described as having such."

10 "Nether-Lochaber", *Inverness Courier*, 6 Sep 1895, p.3.

11 "The Deerness Mermaid", *Stonehaven Journal*, 4 Jul 1895, p.4.

12 "The Orkney Mermaid", *Orkney Herald*, 3 Sep 1890, p.4.

13 Ibid.

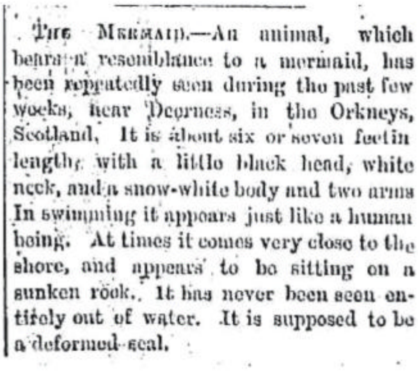
14 "Nether-Lochaber", *Inverness Courier*, 6 Sep 1895, p.3.

15 "The Mermaid Revisits Deerness", *The Scotsman*, 7 Jun 1892, p.3.

16 "The Orkney Mermaid", *Orkney Herald*, 3 Sep 1890, p.4.

17 "Aberdeen Tourists and the Deerness Mermaid", *Edinburgh Evening News*, 28 Jul 1893, p.3.

18 "Nether-Lochaber", *Inverness Courier*, 20 Sep 1895, p.3.



THE MERMAID.—An animal, which bears a resemblance to a mermaid, has been repeatedly seen during the past few weeks, near Deerness, in the Orkneys, Scotland. It is about six or seven feet in length, with a little black head, white neck, and a snow-white body and two arms In swimming it appears just like a human being. At times it comes very close to the shore, and appears to be sitting on a sunken rock. It has never been seen entirely out of water. It is supposed to be a deformed seal.

19 "The Mermaid…", *Orkney Herald*, 20 Jul 1898, p.5.

20 There were some rhetorical flourishes in the newspapers that were not based on first-hand accounts: "The parish of Deerness is at present upset by a mermaid which persists in coming at dusk and sitting on a rock the while she combs her hair", "Wonders of the Deep", *Southern Echo*, 22 Jun 1892, p.2.

21 There is one atypical account that stands out from all the others: Peregrinus, "The Orkney Mermaid Seen Again", *Scottish Leader*, 16 Aug 1893, p.3. I presume that it was a joke. The author had probably, as an adolescent, read too much *Punch* or had drunk a bottle of absinthe earlier in the day. When he and his friend in his boat encountered the Deerness Mermaid, "[she] had long tresses of fair hair; her eyes, as far as we could judge from the distance, were blue, and seemed to shine with a peculiar lustre. Her complexion was sea green, and altogether her face looked like that of a maiden of sweet nineteen… At last my companion struck his oar into the water to bring us nearer her, whereupon she brought her hand up to her mouth, thereby revealing two rather prominent teeth at the sides, turned round, and swam slowly outwards." The 'companion' suggested that her hand at her mouth was actually the mermaid blowing a kiss!

22 *Aberdeen Evening Express*, 30 Mar 1894, p.2.

23 "The Orkney Mermaid", *Edinburgh Evening Dispatch*, 27 Apr 1893, p.2. Of course, "seal's habits" should be understood as the seals they knew: the grey and common seal.

24 Norma Bagnall, "The Selchie in Legend and Literature", *Literature and Lore of the Sea*, Brill, 1986, ed. Patricia Ann Carlson, pp.225-231.

25 ECM Parsons, "Sea monsters and mermaids in Scottish folklore: Can these tales give us information on the historic occurrence of marine animals in Scotland?", *Anthrozoös* 17, 2004, pp.73-80.

26 The nearest breeding populations *via* sea would have been in northern Madagascar. The Stellar Sea Cow was even further away and almost certainly extinct.

27 Though note that many Orkney fishermen sailed into Greenland waters.

28 If the creature summered in Orkney, this would suggest that it wintered further south. Perhaps in an obscure bay in Lancashire… Alternatively it stayed in Orkney, but became, because of its habits, invisible in the winter and spring.

29 "A Kirkwall gentleman, of a scientific turn of mind, informed me that the mermaid was a bladder-nosed seal, whatever that may be", Jas. Stewart, "Deerness Mermaid", *The Scotsman*, 29 Jun 1895, p.11.

30 "The Deerness Mermaid", *Stonehaven Journal*, 4 Jul 1895, p.4: "shaped not unlike a pear, tapering towards the body".

31 Stewart, "Deerness Mermaid".

32 "Nether-Lochaber", *Inverness Courier*, 6 Sep 1895, p.3.

33 Menmuir, "An Account".

34 Against this "The Deerness Mermaid", *Dundee Evening Telegraph*, 22 Jun 1893, p.3: mother and child "are both of the same colour (white), and swim in the same fashion."

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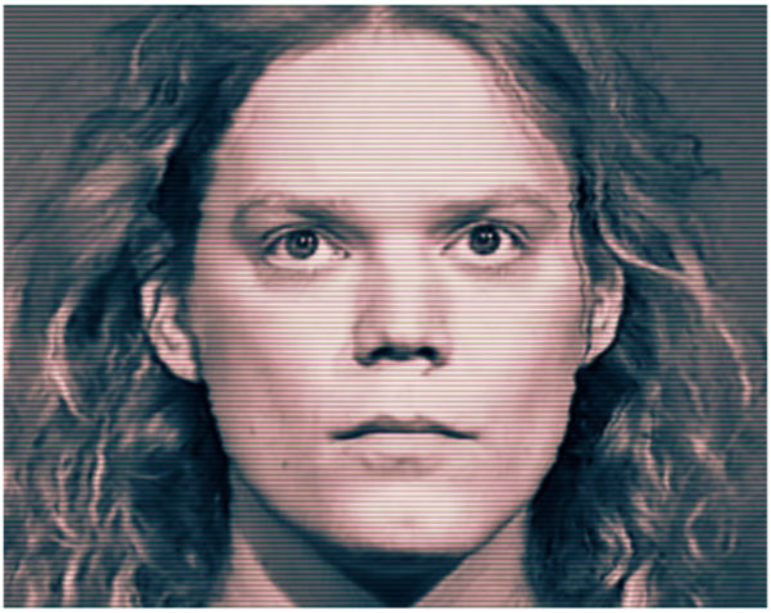
THE ZIZIANS

HIGH STRANGENESS IN SILICON VALLEY

PART ONE: THE ZIZIAN MARTYRS

NOEL ROONEY takes a closer look at the Zizians – frequently described in the media as a "trans death-cult" – and attempts to piece together the story of how a disparate group of bright young Silicon Valley types turned to violence and murder when their notional leader transformed himself from computer scientist Jack LaSota into rogue Rationalist 'Ziz'.

California is a strange amalgam; named after a fantasy island, it has never seemed entirely comfortable with reality. Along with the pioneers and gold diggers, the wannabe stars, a peculiar, ineffable version of the future came and settled there too. The technological future may be embodied in Silicon Valley; but the state, since its inception, has been home to a vast swathe of visionary individuals, groups and communities, dedicated to charting a new pioneer trail, towards humanity's future.



LEFT: Jack LaSota, aka Ziz.

There is a very dark side to this utopian dreamscape. This is the state where Jim Jones came to prominence; where the members of Heaven's Gate castrated and killed themselves in order to board a comet for Heaven (**FT99:4, 32, 100:4, 34-41, 103:45, 226:31, 227:40-45, 271:51-53**). This is the state where Charles Manson and the Family carried out their horrific murders (**FT383:34-40**); where scions of the nascent rock revolution met mysterious deaths in Laurel Canyon (**FT417:32-40**). And this is the state where the Zizians emerged (**FT456:4-5**).

THE BIRTH OF ZIZ

In 2013, Jack LaSota graduated from the University of Fairbanks, Alaska, with a degree in computer science. LaSota was seen as a prodigy, so it was perhaps inevitable that by 2016 he was living in San Francisco, working in AI. There, LaSota began to mix with people involved in the Rationalist movement, and soon began posting on Rationalist forums.

Rationalism is often described as the intellectual arm of the IT industry, though some observers suggest it is more akin to theology. Its principal philosophy is that the human mind, freed of biases and sloppy thinking, is capable of seeing the pure truth, clearly, and thus guiding humanity towards a future where reason drives progress. If this sounds to you like a form of hubristic digital Buddhism, you are not alone.

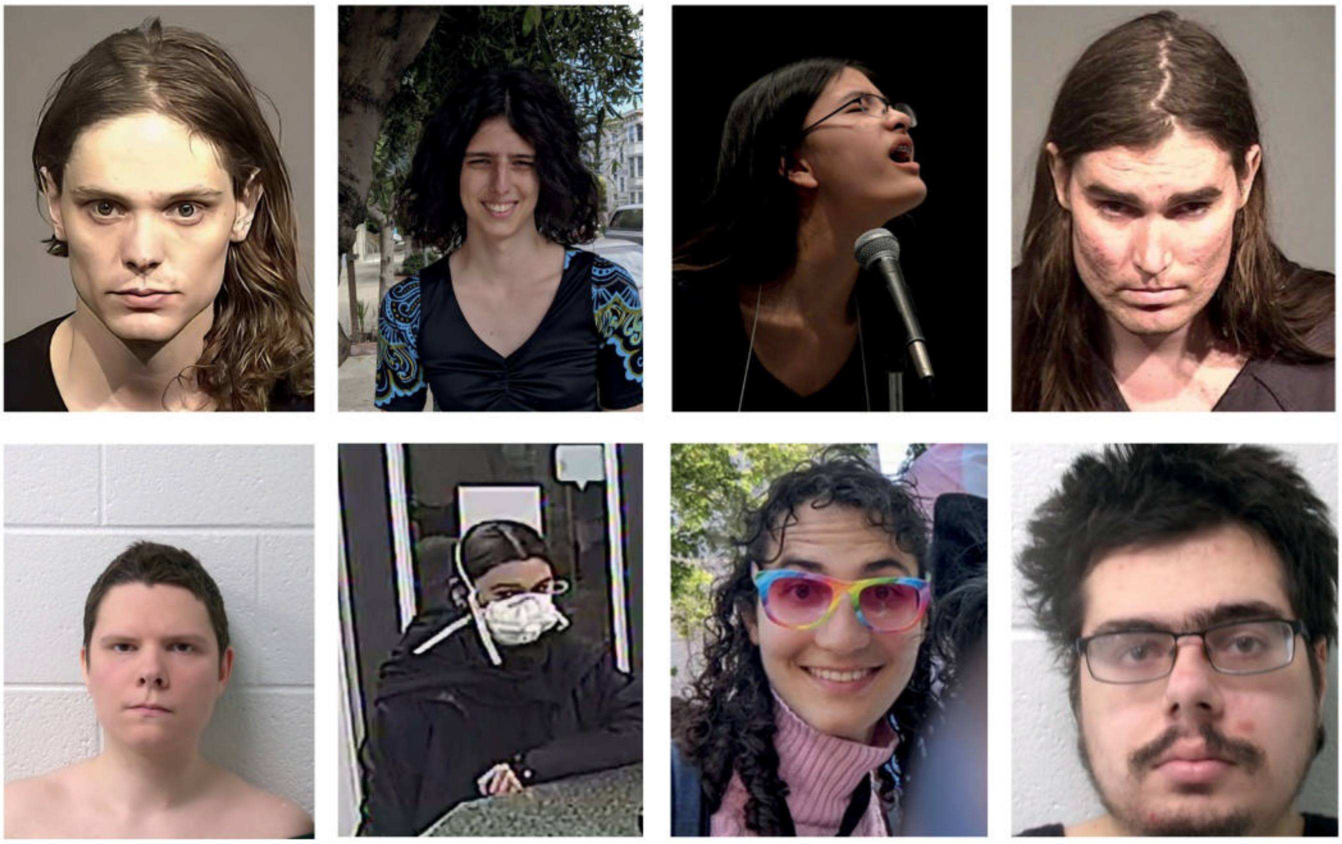
ZIZ CLAIMED THE BRAIN WAS FUNDAMENTALLY SPLIT AND WE EACH HAVE TWO SEPARATE BRAINS

Using the handle Ziz, LaSota posted voluminous amounts of material. Prolixity seems to be a standard feature of Rationalist discourse, but Ziz went further than most. Somewhere around 2016, LaSota started to identify as female and changed pronouns to she/her. Her posts wandered further from the mainstream of Rationalism (which isn't exactly mainstream to begin with). Ziz preached about the perils of the Singularity, a common dialectic in the community. But she also promoted a radical, even militant, form of veganism, claiming that all living things should command equal respect, equal rights, with humans; and, increasingly, that eating meat was evil and that carnivores, at least the human variety, were not worthy of such respect and should be eradicated. Even for the Rationalists, this was heady stuff.

Ziz also espoused anarchism, and claimed that breaking the law was just fine so long as you were in the right; ominously, for many Rationalists, being in the right is considered an ontological state of being rather than a mere opinion. The motto she derived from this claim, 'never surrender', would come to carry tragic undertones.

The strangest aspect of Zizian thought concerns the brain (Rationalists tend to talk about the brain rather than the mind, perhaps because the metaphor of neural networks is understood as reality in some parts of that community). She claimed that the brain was fundamentally split, to the point where we actually each have two separate brains, one left, and one right. The hemispheres, as well as being independent of each other, are effectively individual beings; they can be different genders; they can be hostile, even wanting to kill each other. Ziz went so far as to name the hemispheres of her brain (Xalis on the left, Yantrae on the right) and apparently other Zizians followed suit.

As Ziz poured out hundreds of thousands of words on the subject, her ideas took on a sinister, Orwellian resonance. Each half of the brain could be good or bad. Thus one could categorise people: a person with two good hemispheres is double good; most of us are single good and carry a bad brain as baggage; and some of us are double bad



ABOVE: Unusual suspects: top row, l-r, Gwen Danielson, Emma Borhanian, Suri Dao (aka Tessa Berns), Alexander Leatham (aka Somni Logencia); bottom row, l-r, Michelle Zajko, Teresa Youngblut, Felix Bauckholt (aka Ophelia), and Daniel Blank. **BELOW:** Rationalist guru Eliezer Yudkowsky expressed concern about the Zizian worldview and warned that Ziz was promoting dangerous ideas.

(given her other intellectual predilections, it is easy enough to guess who these people might be).

So far, so eldritch, but we are still at the theoretical stage. As people gravitated towards her ideas (estimates vary but it seems that no more than a couple of dozen people took her ideas seriously) Ziz started to experiment on them. She checked their hemispheres for goodness; needless to say, her brain was double good and, equally inevitably, she failed to find many others with the same qualities.

She also initiated a programme called 'uni-hemispherical sleep'. According to Ziz, because we have two separate cerebral compartments, each can be made to sleep while the other half is awake and working. The subject would lie on a bed, closing one eye; the mentor would stimulate the 'waking' half of their brain with conversation and mental tasks while the subject tried to make the other half sleep. The experiment was not an unqualified success; at least one person, it has been claimed, committed suicide due to the stress of attempting the enforced sleep pattern.

By this point, many of the people involved in Rationalist forums were expressing concern about the Zizian worldview. They included one of the prime gurus of contemporary Rationalism and Singularity theory, Eliezer Yudkowksky, who warned that Ziz was promoting dangerous ideas that might lead gullible people into trouble. Others chimed in; well-known influencer and sex worker Aella posted on X, warning that Ziz had gone rogue. This tactic may have fatally backfired; Ziz's blog, Sinceriously, attracted a lot of hits and, eventually, a group of believers and supporters formed.

ELIEZER YUDKOWSKY / FACEBOOK

So far, eight people have been confidently identified: Gwen Danielson; Emma Borhanian; Suri Dao (aka Tess Berns); Alexander Leatham (aka Somni Logencia); Michelle Zajko; Teresa Youngblut; Felix Bauckholt (aka Ophelia); Daniel Blank; and Maximilian Snyder. All are accounted for, one way or another. However, as we shall see later, this may not be a comprehensive list.

In 2019, CFAR, the Centre for Applied Rationalism, organised a conference, a sort of summer camp for Singularity-obsessed nerds. Ziz was not invited. CFAR put out a statement afterwards: "Two of the individuals involved in this blockade had been asked not to attend our event as a result of prior erratic behaviour towards our staff and others."

Ziz turned up, though, accompanied by three others (four in some reports; as with everything Zizian, details are fluid), all dressed in black costumes and Guy Fawkes masks, all acting aggressively towards attendees and organisers. Someone thought they had seen one of the protestors carrying a gun and called the police. A helicopter and SWAT team appeared and arrested Ziz and her companions. (Curious historical note: the protest was retweeted by a QAnon account.)

At this point things become rather opaque. It seems that the Zizians were charged with a couple of felony offences and minor misdemeanours and released on bail. Sinceriously went dormant, and the Zizians went AWOL. Between 2019 and 2022, the group seems to have stayed on boats or camped out on other people's property; in any case, they stayed under the radar for three years, until a court hearing related to the CFAR protests.

Ziz failed to appear before the hearing; her lawyer claimed that she had died in a boating accident. An obituary appeared in an Alaskan newspaper; Ziz had loved "adventure, friends and family, music, blueberries, biking, computer games and animals". One might add "and faking her

ASSOCIATED PRESS / ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

ABOVE LEFT: Curtis Lind in hospital following an attack by three Zizians that left him blinded in one eye and with a Samurai sword in his back. **ABOVE RIGHT:** Three years later, another Zizian, Maximilian Snyder, came back to finish the job. **BELOW:** Murdered Border Patrol agent David Maland, killed in January 2025.

own death".

Whether this incident catalysed the tragic sequence of events that followed is impossible to say. Perhaps Zizian ideas had hardened in their years of self-imposed exile. Perhaps the threat of exposure prompted Ziz to act and her friends followed suit. In any case, the virtual phase of Zizian history was definitively over; from now on, everything took on a disturbingly visceral reality.

NEVER SURRENDER

Some of the group had been staying on a trailer park in Vallejo, California, renting from one Curtis Lind. Ziz turned up there a few weeks after her fake death and, from then on, they stopped paying rent, probably relying on the Covid moratorium on evictions. Curtis Lind was none too happy with this new arrangement and threatened legal action. There is some confusion about the exact circumstances, but at some point Lind approached the squatters. News reports suggest that three of the group attacked him, stabbing him 50 times and impaling him with a Samurai sword.

Despite being blinded in one eye and having a sword embedded in his back, Lind managed to pull out a gun and started shooting, killing Emma Borhanian. When the police arrived they arrested Suri Dao and Somni Logencia for the attack (both remain in custody). Ziz was reportedly at the scene but wasn't arrested with the others. Sadly, Curtis Lind's ordeal was far from over.

In December of that year, two people, Richard Zajko and his wife, Rita, were found dead in their home. They had both been shot in the head, execution style. Michelle Zajko was questioned by the police, but later released. The same happened to Ziz. This is a curious feature of the whole affair; Ziz is regularly at the scene of a crime, or accused of committing one, but never held for any length of time by the police.

D. MALAND
BORDER PATROL
FEDERAL AGENT
U.S. BORDER PATROL

DEPARTMENT OF HOMELAND SECURITY

The Zizians went dark again after the murders and no one hears of them for three years. I have been unable to find any information about that period in the public domain, but presumably someone knew where they were and what they were up to. This begs the question whether there were other Zizians, or sympathisers, who were able to hide a group of people wanted by the police for a number of crimes. When they finally reappeared, events gathered a murderous momentum.

On 17 January 2025, Curtis Lind was attacked again, this time fatally. Frail from the injuries he had already received, he was unable to fight off his attacker, who stabbed him repeatedly. The assailant walked away, turned around, came back and slit poor Lind's throat. This assassin, Maximillian Snyder, was soon arrested and charged with murder.

Three days later, a shootout in Vermont on the Canadian border brought the Zizians into the limelight again. On the day of Donald Trump's inauguration, Teresa Youngblut and Felix Bauckholt (a German national and maths genius who identified as Ophelia) were stopped at the border for questioning. They had been seen acting suspiciously, dressed in tactical gear, as if they were rehearsing for some kind of action, in Maryland.

Youngblut drew a gun and opened fire, killing a border patrol guard, David Maland. Border agents returned fire, killing Bauckholt and wounding Youngblut, who was later arrested. Some media reports suggested that another person was present when Youngblut and Bauckholt were performing their tactical manoeuvres in Maryland: Ziz, perhaps, ghosting in and out of the picture and seemingly untouchable.

By now, the media were beginning to realise that a major story lay behind the ap-

ASSOCIATED PRESS / ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

ABOVE: FBI agents search a neighborhood in Chapel Hill, North Carolina, where Teresa Youngblut and Felix Bauckholt had been renting homes. **BELOW:** Blogger and Rationalist Aella, who has warned that there may be more Zizians out there "and we sort of expect them to continue doing murders".

parently random shooting incident. They were helped by a flurry of activity on social media. Jessica Taylor, who knew several of the Zizians, posted about the incident and the people involved. The police were also on the larger case; a few weeks later, on 18 February, they arrested Ziz, along with Michelle Zajko and Daniel Blank. The three had been hiding out in the little town of Frostburg, Maryland.

This time, Ziz was unable to slip out of the situation. The police had new evidence on the Zajko murders that, they intimated, pointed the finger of suspicion at her. Michelle Zajko was also accused of procuring the guns for Youngblut and Bauckholt.

All the known Zizians are now either in custody or dead. The body count currently stands at seven; three Zizians (two shot, one by suicide) and four other, innocent victims; plus one person who may have faked her death but has not been seen since. And that might be the end of the story, except for a chilling, gnomic X post from Aella:

"We still don't know the whereabouts of the people in this story who aren't either dead or in custody, and we sort of expect them to continue doing murders."

Who these other people are, and what their connection to Ziz and the Zizians might be, we don't know, and if Aella does, she isn't saying. But the possibility remains that other members of what most media outlets are calling a cult are still free, out there somewhere, plotting revenge.

A WAR OF IDEAS?

Are the Zizians a cult? They certainly resemble one in some respects. A charismatic leader, who subjects members to odd ordeals; a group that appears to have spent time together out of the public eye; a list of beliefs and aims that are anything but conventional. Yet I have my doubts; for a start, the notion of a cult where members make strong individual claims of identity feels like a contradiction in terms. And there is no evidence that Ziz directed the activities of the others. Much of the time they were scattered around the country in smaller groups, apparently in control of their own actions, however bizarre.

More to the point, labelling them one way or another takes us no nearer to understanding the motives, or the momentum, that drove a group of young, immensely talented and intelligent people to abandon successful careers in AI and commit multiple murders. And there is a bigger question, one that ought to trouble us all.

In the voluminous online literature of the Rationalists, there are hints, here and there, that Ziz and her companions may not be the only people to have disappeared down a rather less than rational rabbit hole. The posts themselves, when read by an outsider, often hint at a level of existentialist despair – and intellectual confusion – that is deeply unnerving. One senses a community of people, mostly young, often neurodivergent, who have spent their lives being told that they are the intellectual elite, the cream of the crop, coming up against concepts and arguments that they cannot properly get their heads around; or worse, encountering concepts that may not make sense and persuading themselves that they do understand them, and better than anyone else.

In fact, the question that has haunted me since I came across the story of the Zizians is: Were the Zizians, and their victims, simply martyrs (and perhaps just the first martyrs) in a theological war of ideas?

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➾ **NOEL ROONEY** is a poet and student of anomalies. He lives in London with a flock of people and animals and writes FT's regular 'Conspirasphere' column.

cyclingelectric
DEMO DAY
2025

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Pop goes the crytpid

SHARON HILL ponders the fate of old school cryptozoology in the age of TikTok and

Observers of the modern cryptozoological scene cannot fail to notice the trend towards the inclusion of more fantastical, folkloric, unnatural and supernatural beings labelled as "cryptids". There is no shortage of stories (and AI depictions) of nightcrawlers, pale crawlers, dogmen, goatmen and shapeshifters. What happened to cryptozoology as a scientific-minded search for "hidden" animals? The 21st century happened. That's what.

There has been a definable slide away from "cryptozoology" of the Bernard Heuvelmans type and a huge rise in the popularisation of "cryptids". Fewer professional scientific voices now advocate for the zoological reality of cryptids compared to an uncountable number of media creators promoting them as mysterious monsters. The modern popular use of "cryptid" has expanded to signify any weird sentient thing that people claim to see or experience. The idea of a cryptid having a zoological foundation has diminished. These new "pop cryptids" appearing within modern digital media are exaggerated, magical, supernatural and sometimes wholly invented. To see for yourself, look at digital platforms popular with the under-30s like TikTok, Instagram, Etsy, and the cryptids subreddit.

In North America, the most popular cryptids still are Bigfoot, and its regional relations, and lake monsters; but the pop cryptid that soared highest in the last 20 years has been Mothman, with its internationally known celebration, the Mothman Festival. Mothman became popular with younger generations, who adapted the creature to their modern needs: as a superhero, a caring boyfriend, a cute toy, a cosplay character and an icon for social weirdness.

Mothman creates conflict regarding its inclusion as a "cryptid". The camp that views cryptids through a zoological, potentially scientific lens will assert that Mothman has little or no basis in zoology and represents a paranormal entity carrying significant fictional, supernatural baggage. As such, it does not represent an animal that would qualify as a "cryptid" (though there are sound reasons to think that an unusual animal sighting sparked the Mothman flap in 1966). The cryptid populist camp embraces any weird entity that exists in folklore, legends or spooky depictions of any kind, including "creepypasta" tales, and believes they qualify as "cryptids". Mothman is a pop cryptid all-star. These arguments about the boundaries of cryptid inclusion illustrate a critical rift in the field of cryptozoology.

Some obvious influencing factors played a part in the drift away from the zoological foundation of cryptids and the populist trend. First, the professional efforts of cryptozoology collapsed. The International Society of Cryptozoology failed to establish the field as scientifically reputable before it folded in 1998. The ISC did not even succeed in establishing a useful methodology different from or superior to that of traditional field zoology. New species are still discovered all the time, but blockbuster mystery animals were not discovered through cryptozoological efforts. And it can be argued that the evidence for animals such as Bigfoot, the Yeti or Nessie has got progressively worse over time.

> *Several cryptids are embraced by the LBGTQ community*

The rise in amateur involvement in subjects relating to the paranormal – including investigating hauntings, UFOs, and cryptozoology – coincided with growing distrust of scientific authority in society. An enthusiast never had to be a zoologist to call themselves a "cryptozoologist". The term is used by or applied to self-publishing authors, artists, online personalities or TV show participants. There is no accredited degree programme for cryptozoologists.

With no scientific society as a gatekeeper, the field was left to eager amateurs using worldwide platforms for information exchange and self-expression. This expansion into the public consciousness was key to generating interest in cryptids and ultimately creating a large population of casual cryptid fans, some of whom also called themselves researchers.

One effect of the mass popularity of cryptids was for towns to promote their local folklore and history in the form of tourist attractions and festivals. While the original process of cryptozoology was to downplay and exclude the supernatural or weird characteristics of cryptids in order to discover the zoological reality, now the weirdness is embraced and emphasised because that attracts visitors.

The world has become a much smaller place for canonical cryptids to remain hidden, but the human imagination is boundless: new pop cryptids are created and old tales resurrected with regularity. Modern efforts in cryptozoology are frequently less about solving a mystery and more about fashionably performing one's values, beliefs and identity through the examples of mysterious creatures. The 21st century cryptid enthusiast wants to take "legend trips", to cosplay ("be" the cryptid) and experience the spookiest tales.

The cryptid scene is far more open to diversity today, with several cryptids embraced by the LGBTQ community: being the "other" who wishes to remain outside mainstream culture or societal norms is celebrated through cryptids.

The trajectory of cryptids from their original zoological framing to that of malleable pop cultural material is convoluted, but instructive. The pop cryptid is strongly rejected by those who insist that a narrow, zoological view of cryptozoology is the only correct one. I believe that narrow view is a dead end. It is not possible to lock such a culturally fruitful idea into a small box. Exploration and research into the vibrant field of cryptids (in terms of sociology, folklore, media studies, historical zoology and more) appears exciting and promising.

In the broad context, the idea of a "cryptid" has escaped the sphere of cryptozoology and now lives in the popular mainstream. The founders of cryptozoology as a field of study could not have anticipated that the scope and popularity of cryptids would explode into a cultural and media bonanza. But it has. The pop cryptid idea looks forward into a vibrant future and not backwards to an idealistic past.

SHARON HILL is a lifelong enthusiast of cryptids and other anomalous natural and unnatural phenomena. Visit the "Pop Goes the Cryptid" page at sharonahill.com for more on this topic.

Fabulous Animals unearthed

RICHARD FREEMAN is delighted to finally revisit the long-lost David Attenborough series that (along with *Doctor Who*) set him on the path of the cryptozoologist...

Fabulous Animals

"It would be a very bold man that says sea monsters don't exist"

I'm often asked what inspired me to become a working cryptozoologist. I had two main influences back in the 1970s. The first was the thrilling and scary (pre-woke) *Doctor Who* with Jon Pertwee and Tom Baker at the helm. The second was the work of David Attenborough. *The World About Us* (1967-1987) awakened the wanderlust that still burns in my blood. *Life on Earth* (1979) kindled a fascination for animals both living and extinct. But there was one series that became as mysterious and strange as the cryptids I hunt today.

Fabulous Animals (1975) was shown once and once only, never to be repeated. It was David Attenborough's only foray into cryptozoology, despite his self-confessed interest in the subject. Nearly half a century on, I recalled it as vividly as any episode of *Doctor Who*. A fresh-faced Attenborough, who looked much younger than his 45 years, presented the show from a studio set-dressed to look like a zoologist's study. He brought in books from his own collection to illustrate the episodes and to read from; these included Edward Topsell's *The History of Four Footed Beasts and Serpents* (1607-1608). There was the odd cutaway to a reconstruction or Attenborough talking to somebody outside the studio. The show also featured clips from his earlier *Zoo Quest* series (1954-1963). It was all very simple compared to the epic shows of today, but its influence cannot be overestimated.

Each episode ran to 25 minutes or so and dealt with a different class of fabulous animal: dragons, sea monsters, winged beasts, horned creatures, and so on. Attenborough would explain the background to the legends then offer up some theories, and in some cases look at modern day sightings.

After that 1975 broadcast, the series vanished. Some years ago, on the back of David Attenborough's huge popularity, I wrote to the BBC suggesting they release *Fabulous Animals* on DVD, maybe with updated material and comments from the great man himself. I was given the brush-off in a rather high-handed manner and told that they had no plans to release it.

Imagine my surprise when, in early November of 2024, the whole series turned up on YouTube (see **FT453:20**): it was like hearing that the Yeti had been caught and was now on display at London Zoo! The whole thing had been put up by a user called 'Skinny V The Basement Archivist' who roots out rare TV shows and shares them online. I first wrote to Skinny thanking and congratulating him, then sat down to binge-watch the whole series for the first time in 49 years. Apart from the rather grand title music, which I had completely forgotten, my memories of the show were pretty accurate.

Episode one is entitled 'Here Be Monsters' and offers an introduction to strange creatures. Attenborough mentions gryphons, dog-headed men and sea serpents in travellers' tales. Even depictions of known creatures like rhinos and giraffes, he points out, looked odd when rendered by those who had never actually seen a specimen. The legends of giants are examined and explained by the discovery of huge fossil bones of animals like mammoths and dinosaurs. In Russia, the myth of giant, burrowing beasts that died if they were exposed to sunlight is shown to have been based on mammoths frozen in the permafrost. In Patagonia, the hides of giant ground sloths were found on a ranch. They looked so fresh that the animals could have died yesterday. In fact, they had been preserved in a cave and were some 13,000 years old.

Episode two, 'Marvels of the Deep', looks at marine creatures such as mermaids. Attenborough thinks that the manatee, the creature often used as a model for the mermaid, is too ugly. He also looks at a newspaper report of a mermaid put on display in Rome by an Englishman called Hudson. It turned out that the 'mermaid' was a woman held captive by Hudson, who controlled her with a cord around her neck. Unsurprisingly, he was sent to jail. Sideshow gaffs are examined and shown in X-ray.

Then he moves on to the kraken and mentions the work of Pierre Denys de Montfort, reasoning that the kraken is based on sightings of a giant squid. Some sea serpent reports, Attenborough suggests, are of gigantic eels, a theory back in fashion at the moment. The Gloucester sea serpent of New England is mentioned, as is the classic *Daedalus* sighting. David reads from the ship's log of the *HMS Umfuli* for 4 December 1893, which describes a huge, hump-backed, long-necked beast.

The episode concludes with the Loch Ness Monster and a recreation of the 1933 Spicer sighting. The Dinsdale film and several photos are shown, some now known to be fake. Attenborough favours the giant eel theory (as do I). The episode finishes with a brief mention of the cœlacanth: "It would be a very bold man that says sea monsters don't exist."

Episode three, 'Here Be Dragons', goes on the trail of the most ancient monster of all. Topsell's account of dragons and how they kill elephants is cited – this may be an exaggerated depiction of the python. Attenborough shows film of the flying dragon (*Draco volans*), a gliding lizard he himself saw in Borneo, and the paradise tree snake (*Chrysopelea paradisi*) that can also glide.

The legend of Saint Hilda turning the snakes that once infested Whitby Abbey to stone is mentioned and the fossil ammonites found on the nearby beach identified as the story's serpents.

Attenborough rejects crocodiles as proto-dragons as they are too well known. In fact, the ancient

Chinese identified various crocodilians as dragons. The Chinese alligator (*Alligator sinensis*) and the huge saltwater crocodile (*Crocodylus porosus*) were both looked on as types of dragon, as was the recently discovered Chinese gharial (*Hanyusuchus sinensis*). There are records of proclamations being read to this latter species and their waters being poisoned with calcium oxide after they ate people and livestock. Records date back from the Bronze Age and the species seems to have gone extinct from habitat loss and hunting around 1630.

Attenborough's own hunt for a Komodo dragon (*Varanus komodoensis*) in *Zoo Quest* is recalled and a clip shown. The Komodo dragon's influence on dragon lore is not as great as you might think, as it is only found on a handful of remote islands. The now extinct *Varanus priscus*, better known by its old name of *Megalania*, may have been three times as long as the Komodo dragon. Sightings of monster lizards persist in New Guinea.

Episode four is 'Winged Creatures' and we begin with Sinbad's encounter with the elephant-eating roc, a monster bird. Marco Polo was told stories of the roc and shown huge eggs to prove they were true. It was said they came from Madagascar. The giant bird of legend was based on the Madagascan elephant bird (*Aepyornis maximus*) a giant, flightless bird hunted to extinction some 1,000 years ago. We see Attenborough collecting egg fragments in the field and the whole egg glued together like a 3-D jigsaw puzzle.

Next comes the dodo (*Raphus cucullatus*) of Mauritius and its sad fate; the one and only snuffed specimen, held at the Ashmolean Museum, was burned after becoming mouldy.

There is a brief look at the phœnix of Arabia and bird-headed Egyptian gods, before we move on to birds of paradise. Early preserved specimens sent to Europe had their legs and bones removed, leaving only feathers and heads. The myth sprang up that they lived in heaven, feeding on dew and never returning to Earth until they died. The episode ends with Attenborough describing a sleepless night with a vampire bat in Guyana.

In episode five, 'Horns of Magic', he looks at legendary beasts with horns and antlers. Film of the Abbots Bromley Horn Dance (**FT336:26-33**) is shown and we are told that the reindeer horns used are 1,000 years old and the tradition dates back to at least 1686.

Attenborough turns his attention to cave paintings, especially those showing the giant wild cattle known as aurochs (*Bos primigenius*). Julius Cæsar wrote of them haunting the woods of Germany and noted their ferocity. The horns of the giant bulls were used as drinking vessels.

In the UK, the Romans brought the cult of Mithras with them. The cult's symbol was a white bull that was ritually slaughtered. Attenborough visits Northumberland to see the white cattle living wild on the Chillingham estate. Once thought to be descendants of white cattle brought over by the Romans, recent genetic studies suggest they date back to a mediæval strain. They have, however, lived mostly wild for at least 700 years. Attenborough meets their keeper and helps feed the cattle a supplement of hay. The bulls were hunted, one a year, until 1872, when the man who was to become Edward VII shot one. Since then there have been no more hunts.

Of course the most famous horned beast of legend is the unicorn, which could be captured by using a virgin. The magical horn of the beast, the alicorn, was used to negate poison and is shown to be the tusk of a narwhal (*Monodon monoceros*). These were worth three times their weight in gold in the 13th century, and up until the 18th century the Royal Society of Physicians listed unicorn horns as essential to any chemist.

The unicorn is not wholly dismissed; the manipulation of the horn buts of goats and cattle can produce an animal with a single large horn sprouting forwards from the forehead. These animals invariably become leaders of the herd. Attenborough suggests that native people did this for centuries and this is where the story had its genesis.

The final episode, 'Man or Beast', looks at human/animal hybrids such as the manticore, lamia and satyr. Little people of legend get a mention too. In the book *Mirror of the World*, tiny people only two cubits (36in) tall are recorded. Attenborough tells us of tiny stone axes found in Sri Lanka that may point to a lost race of pygmies before examining the known pygmy races of Central Africa.

He also suggests that there may be some truth to the stories of dog-headed men. Baboons were thought of as having near human intelligence and may have added to the idea of dog-headed people. Another possibility is that they were based on the giant lemurs of Madagascar. Some of these, now extinct, were bigger than gorillas; we see a clip of the largest living lemur, the Indri (*Indri indri*).

The skulls of extinct elephants are used as an explanation for the cyclops of Greek legend, the large nasal cavity being interpreted as an eye socket.

Next is a look at modern man-beasts like the Sasquatch and Yeti. Attenborough briefly relates some stories such as the Ape Canyon case and the Albert Ostman tale. He looks at the famous Patterson-Gimlin footage and concludes that the men may have been the victim of a hoax. The Yeti, on the other hand, is a different story. Despite dismissing the Pangboche scalp, Attenborough is convinced by other evidence. There is a clip of the late mountaineer Don Whillans talking about his sighting of a big, ape-like creature in the Himalayas. He also speaks about a young American scientist on an expedition to the Himalayas who awoke one morning to find Yeti tracks all around his tent. Attenborough feels that the creature is real, some form of huge primate that lives in the forests below the snowfields – an opinion he holds to this day.

There is then some film of Attenborough with proboscis monkeys (*Nasalis larvatus*) and mountain gorillas (*Gorilla beringei beringei*), noting with the latter that we are far more dangerous to them than vice-versa.

He rounds off the episode, and the series, musing about how we like to make animals seem larger and fiercer than they actually are, backing this up with film and TV examples like *King Kong*, *The Lost World* and… *Doctor Who*!

The whole series stands the test of time remarkably well, and is just as watchable today as it was 50 years ago. I can't help but feel that a new incarnation of *Fabulous Animals* is in order, half a century after the original, with updates and new information. How about it BBC? And if you need a presenter…

You can watch the whole series on YouTube: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CU7ZZ_nHxg4&list=PLyc_XMzJb5hkoj8rmx-Ll_A2UM7LU8L4h

RICHARD FREEMAN is a cryptozoologist and the Zoological Director of the Centre for Fortean Zoology.

STRANGE STATESMEN #64

THE TRAGEDY OF KING LIRA

Five years on from the onset of Covid-19, **SD TUCKER** concludes his profile of Italy's localism-loving, anti-vax Orange Vest General, whose plan to revive the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies has gained valuable intellectual currency from the planet Ummo.

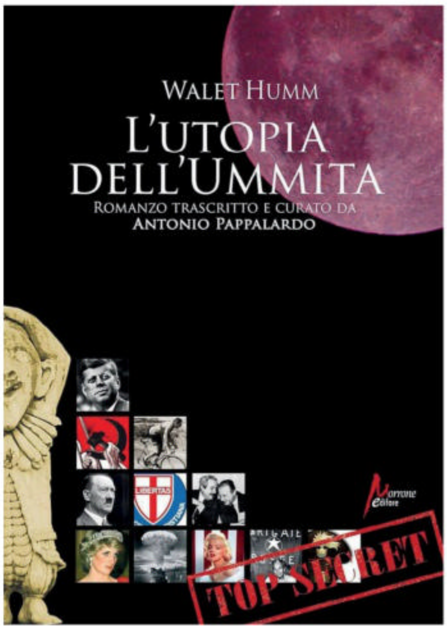
LEFT: General Pappalardo – politician, writer, composer and alien amanuensis.

PIERO CRUCIATTI / ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

Writing strange novels is a sideline not unknown to politicians. One such avant-garde novelist is Italy's General Antonio Pappalardo, rabble-rousing leader of both the Orange Vests anti-vax street-mob faction and the Movement for Italian Liberation (MLI), whom we met last issue (**FT457:50-53**). A retired high-up union official in the *carabinieri* quasi-military national police unit, Pappalardo is also a conspiracy theorist, convinced Bill Gates and his New World Order (NWO) faked the entire Covid-19 pandemic to subjugate humanity by transforming them into socially-distanced robots controlled by their own smartphones. To thwart this Illuminati plot, the Lennon and McCartney mega-fan planned a series of global concerts for peace, where his startling compositions, such as *The Beatles Symphony*, would cause attendees to re-perceive the reality of their own souls, cast off their Microsoft-enforced status as Covid Cybermen, and rebel against Gates's global health-dictatorship before it was too late.

A proud Sicilian by birth, Pappalardo abhors globalisation, being a tireless advocate for the benefits of sound local government. He especially resents the *Risorgimento*, the 19th-century process of Italian political unification under direct control from Rome, preferring the previous Kingdom of the Two Sicilies, when his native island was still master of its own destiny; the colour of his supporters' garish hi-vis vests is a nod towards his native soil's famous orange-groves. He has run in vain as a candidate for regional elections, promising to split Italy into a jigsaw of pre-*Risorgimento* federated provincial sub-States. He has also pledged to create an alternative currency, the Lira Italica, as a parallel currency to the Euro, chief symbol of transnational EU dictatorship. Founding his own bank, Pappalardo would print one Lira Italica for every Euro, so doubling national wealth (or halving all prices, viewed another way).

IT WAS ITALY'S FIRST POLITICAL PARTY FOUNDED UPON AN ALIEN PHILOSOPHY



According to Pietro Pappalardo, Honorary President of the Sicilian Orange Vests branch,[1] the MLI would also combat the "anti-southernist policies of the central government" by doling out thousands of new Sicilian Lira to happy islanders every month, including a fixed income of 1,200 to each housewife, to safeguard the traditional family unit currently being torn apart by liberalism; he would also offer 30,000 Lira in "non-repayable loans" (not loans, then…) to every small business affected by NWO Covid lockdowns. Any firms which relocate to Sicily will also pay no tax for the first year, to boost local employment; one day, taxation may be abolished altogether. Simply printing and distributing endless sums of made-up money might appear unfeasible, but The General has explained his agenda is inspired by the ideas of Depression-busting Nazi Economics Minister Hjalmar Schacht: "His model was a winner, why not try it again?" Parallel currencies are neither illegal nor unknown, and Pappalardo says he won permission from Mario Draghi, former President of the European Central Bank, to mint his own after spotting him "in an alley" one day and approaching him brandishing a coin. "Yes, yes, of course… You can print it, General," replied Draghi, wisely perceiving that, like the great poet-statesman Gabriele d'Annunzio (**FT341:48-50**) before him, Pappalardo was "not a politician, but an artist of ideas and music", and so could do whatever he damn well liked.[2]

A NOVEL EXPERIENCE

Pappalardo's 2010 novel, *The Utopia of the Ummites*, "is not a real novel"; its cover not only proclaims the book was written by someone named Walet Humm, but also that it was "A Novel Transcribed and Edited by Antonio Pappalardo". In a 2018 video, The General revealed the surprising true nature

ABOVE: A photograph purportedly taken in 1967 outside Madrid showing a UFO bearing the Ummo symbol.

of his co-authorship. Late one evening in February 2000, "when there was not even the Moon", he was walking in the Apennines with his wife when suddenly a six-foot tall humanoid appeared wearing "a long grey raincoat, a scarf and a hat on his head", an item he "gallantly" doffed in greeting, said Pappalardo, "which somehow reassured me." Mrs P "got scared" and wished to flee, but her brave husband pointed out that "I am a *carabiniere* and I am capable of facing dangers of all kinds!" and confronted the odd being, who quickly identified himself with the tautologous words: "I am an alien, and I come from another planet."

This was Ummo, 13.5 light years distant, and he had travelled all this way to give Agent Orange a vital mission. Taking a 544-page manuscript from his "big pocket", the ET, named Walet Humm, explained: "A fantastic story is written here. Please publish it." But why choose Antonio for the task? Because, said Walet, he was "a free man", unlike most sheeple today, who would surely be willing to spend the next 10 years translating the book from its current confusing mess of Spanish, French and English into the divine tongue of Dante. Pappalardo stayed up all night reading, and was "amazed", but when he tried to talk to his wife about it the next morning, she no longer had any memory of their Close Encounter. This all gave Pappalardo "a smile" of amused recognition, because "as a *carabiniere*, I had questioned people who have met aliens, but such a thing had never happened to me" before.

The purpose of Humm's tract is the same as Pappalardo's peace-concerts: to awaken a sleeping humanity from Illuminati slavery. Its main message is that Ummo "waits for the South Wind to come", a reference to "the enormous breath of the southern populations of the world" who are currently hypnotised by the smartphones of the "unscrupulous multinationals taking over Africa and South America". The Ummites, too, oppose globalisation and advocate a return to greater regional autonomy, just as the General wants for Sicily. It was Ummo's message of municipal emancipation, Pappalardo explained, which initially inspired him to create the MLI, thus making it Italy's first ever political party founded upon an alien philosophy. The blurb for Humm's "disturbing novel" warns that "nothing happened in the history of man" that was not guided by the hidden hand of the NWO, and claims that the book has "an eschatological and esoteric character that fascinates, as is difficult to find in today's fiction, and has, essentially, the structure of a game, with its rules and visions, but a damn serious and complicated game, where the stakes at stake is the happiness of man." On the cover, convincingly stamped 'TOP SECRET' in English, are images of many of the NWO's most appalling historical crimes – the murders of JFK and Princess Diana, the rise of Adolf Hitler and Soviet Communism, the nuking of Japan, and what looks suspiciously like the invention of the Tour de France.

Pappalardo managed to exploit his connections to have his book officially launched in the Palace of Justice of Cosenza, under the auspices of an actual Italian lawyers' union and its freedom-friendly President, Filomena Falsetta. Falsetta gave a no doubt shrill and high-pitched speech branding Pappalardo both "the undisputed protagonist" of the event and an "extraordinarily human" fellow, the creator (surely transcriber?) of "an unlikely but profoundly true story" of ET-Earthling contact, which points out "the sad social context in which we are forced to live today, a context in which a purely formal and instrumental conception of society prevails" rather than a traditional human-centred one. Today, "unfortunately, we [Italians] do not live in a state of law", explained the professional lawyer, but in an illegal State tyranny overseen by "men unable to govern the world, perpetrators of injustice and suffocators of freedom." The union had decided to push this "important cultural promotion initiative" of Ummite-human discourse in protest at recent State reforms aimed at causing "paralysis of the judicial machine" by handing ever-more powers of judges over to tyrannical MPs. Thankfully, Humm's alien book "aims to re-thread the tie of a dialogue" between judiciary and parliament, meaning the text's "true key" is "a warning to shake our souls, to awaken our consciences, to prevent the current political forces from slowly and unconsciously transforming us into slaves of our own Republic." By 2018, Pappalardo had composed a *Revolution Symphony* to accompany the text, relaunching it anew at a public PR-concert, attended by speechifying ufologists, a local mayor and presumably a full orchestra (or perhaps just a CD player).

He even promoted it on the website of SUPU (Syndicated Union of Pensioners in Uniform), a body established by Pappalardo himself in 2007, which looks after the welfare of retired policemen, soldiers and *carabinieri* – the rough equivalent of the Police Benevolent Fund endorsing David Icke. In 2017, www.sindacatosupu.it admitted that "it is a serious site, no doubt, therefore it arouses curiosity that this article has appeared [on it] that talks about extraterrestrials and world events including Trump and geopolitics." There then followed an imaginary dialogue between Pappalardo and a *carabinieri* colleague in which *Il Generale* explained how the Illuminati, led by "the multibillionaire [financier George] Soros", had been performing false-flag terrorist massacres around the world before leaving fake messages of support for nationalist, anti-globalist politicians like Donald Trump and Marine Le Pen on the framed perpetrators' social media pages, so sullying the name of local government in the eyes of a gullible world.

The well-read *carabiniere* then reminds Pappalardo of his prescient 2010 book in which "an alien pointed out to you that there is a criminal organisation worldwide, like 'THE SPECTRE' of the James Bond stories, which organises excellent murders" to control mankind. This was true, explained the General, and Trump had annoyed them with his 2017 restrictions on Muslim immigration, thus denying the NWO Burger Kings 10,000 cheap Arab slave-labourers for their low-paying US fast-food joints. Fortunately, the two men being inherently Orange, Pappalardo was in direct personal contact with Trump's "top officials", who encouraged him to dislodge the Illuminati-riddled Italian government with the aid of the *carabinieri* as a warning to the NWO. Just so long as they took Rome in the right way, "with no headshots", the US would not intervene, as Italy's was an illegal non-government whose so-called

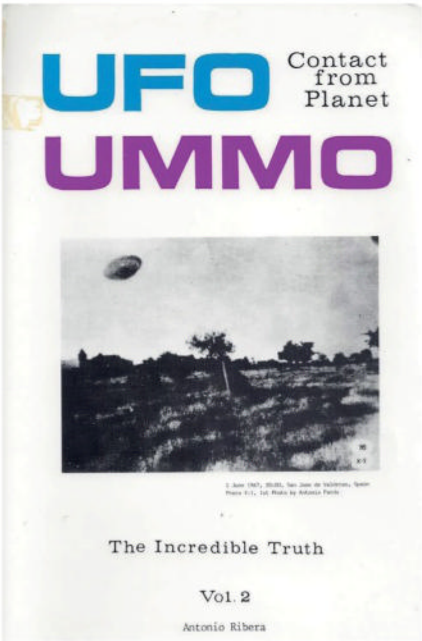
LEFT: José Luis Jordán Peña making an appearance on Spanish television. **BELOW:** One of Antonio Ribera's Ummo tracts.

'President', Sergio Mattarella, "is not the President" at all. In fact, if a new regime was not in place soon, Trump would get impatient and topple Mattarella himself. Already, an obscure local mayor, "formerly a policeman", and therefore a probable SUPU member, had refused to shake "the abusive offender" Mattarella's hand in public, thereby showing the Ummite plan of hyper-regional rebellion was near at hand, so "God's punishment, even if late, will come unfailing and inevitable!" upon Bill Gates's evil robot-spawning head. Having absorbed all this vital information, retired policemen could then finally click elsewhere on the site to access their useful SUPU pension-calculator tool.

But what is actually in this world-shattering novel/not-a-novel of the Earth-visiting Ummite? Humm's plot unfolds on 31 December 1899, when 12 concerned citizens (echoing the 12 self-proclaimed wise disciples who head up Pappalardo's MLI Party) are gathered in a villa to discuss "the miserable condition" of Sicily under the excessively centralised control of "Roman corruption". Suddenly, "strange noises" are heard from the villa's Hall of Mirrors. Venturing inside, within "a luminous atmosphere", the dozen see an Ummite-enabled vision of another 12 sages lamenting the similarly woeful state of Sicily a century in the future, on 31 December 1999. Within this narrative framework, Walet Humm weaves a paranoid yarn illustrating how the Illuminati have controlled Italian public life from the *Risorgimento* onwards, and showing that things were much better during the preceding Kingdom of the Two Sicilies.

Profound knowledge of the Ummite religion is also revealed. Theirs is a Manichæan creed, with a god of all darkness and evil, Thufer, in constant war with the Ummite god of light and love, Xama: Thufer is the NWO deity, and Xama the true Lord of all those who believe in local coins for local people. The fable is a political allegory in which Humm rejects the globalisation of the Illuminati, advocating instead "the happiness and freedom of sovereign peoples", as conveniently also promoted in the policies of Pappalardo. Thus, the SUPU pensioners' union, MLI Party and Orange Vests all stand as direct vehicles for the benign political aims of localism-loving Andy Burnhams from another planet.[3] Or do they?

THE BORG-LIKE UMMITES HAVE NO SENSE OF ART OR BEAUTY



UFO

Contact from Planet

UMMO

The Incredible Truth

Vol. 2

Antonio Ribera

CLOSE ENCOUNTERS OF THE TURD KIND

The Ummo affair is one of the biggest frauds in all ufology (see **FT149:34-35, 336:58-59**). In 1966 a Spanish hoaxer, José Luis Jordán Peña, began a decades-long campaign of posting letters and making telephone calls in the voice of Donald Duck to ufologists worldwide, these messages supposedly coming from a Nordic-looking alien race named the Ummites, who secretly walked among us. A hard-line Catholic once tasked with infiltrating occult sects by the Jesuit spy agency Fé Católica, Peña filled his missives with complete Ummo-Jumbo, describing an alien world so absurd only a moron could possibly accept it – and plenty did, thus proving the old adage that once a man stops believing in God, he will start believing in anything. Peña's wider motives may have been political. According to his daughter Maite's biography *I, Too, Was a Victim of Ummo*, and ufologist JJ Benitez's exposé *The Man Who Whispered to the Ummites*, Peña was a one-time follower of Spain's Falangist dictator General Franco, who collaborated with domestic spy chiefs and the CIA to discredit Earth-Communism by portraying Ummo as a socialistic Hell, or else to distribute coded messages via innocent-looking UFO-letters. Yet many letters also decry capitalism, suggesting maybe the KGB sponsored the fraud to dent America and Franco, who were Cold War allies. Or, being a sceptical parapsychologist on the side, Peña may simply have sought to dupe his more gullible colleagues. But others later faked their own Ummo letters too, possibly helping explain their ideological swerves.

In a process often compared to Jorge Luis Borges's classic short story *Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius*,[4] Peña's hoax developed its own life, with others adopting the idea of Planet Ummo to push their own agendas: "I don't like homosexuals playing with my symbol," Peña berated a rogue gay Ummo-cult. What would he have thought of Pappalardo's unauthorised fan-fiction sequel?

The social structure of Peña's Planet Ummo was hardly that of Pappalardo's beloved Kingdom of the Two Sicilies, despite their shared vanished monarchical past. Under the long-ago rule of Ummo's child-genius, Queen IE456, there were only two classes: scientists and slaves. Clever aliens joined the Queen's lab-based ruling caste, whereas dimwits had their living brains removed. Only the most eminent Einsteins were allowed into IE456's presence, naked with their eyes closed; if their theories won favour, she would allow them to gratefully lap up the royal wee and poo, deemed a great honour. IE46 was "the brain of the planet"; as her chosen scientific theories determined how everyone saw reality, she was the creator of the entire Universe, her crowned head "the co-ordination centre of the cosmos". After a dissenting professor hid a bomb in her bathroom, IE456 was succeeded by her mad 12-year-old daughter WIE1, who spent her days sitting in a bush and murdering four million innocents in gulags. WIE1 ordered the death of anyone not able to eat her shit, which caused a problem as there was not enough to go around; so scientists homeopathically diluted it in water so everyone could have a sip; refuseniks had their heads dunked in animal-dung until they choked. WIE1 was finally deposed by the Ummite Jesus, UMMOWOA (or inmate number 2.332.874) who, outraged by seeing a plastic-coated slave-girl forced to perform lesbian acts on one of WIE1's school-age guards, transmitted seditious telepathic messages Ummo-wide revealing the Queen had gone cruelly insane, triggering a total planetary *Risorgimento*.

Jesus-loving eugenicists now isolated all children and forcibly inter-bred them to eliminate any individuality, evolving Ummo into a peaceful giant ant-colony governed by an ultra-rational bank of super-computers. Today, infant Ummites are stolen from parents aged 16 and compelled to breed – if they need practice beforehand, adult prisoners are handed over for kids "to manipulate as they want". A "series of prenuptial exams" are then taken, assessing if two potential mates will improve the species, or simply "perpetuate the existence of mutants" and "non-viable monsters" which "need expensive assistance" to survive. "Find another partner, your genotypes would not produce a performing product," such teenage mis-matches are told. Ummites find smells sexually attractive, not looks, alien noses being hyper-sensitive; prior to any wedding-night, the happy couple must not wash for 30 hours, to facilitate sweaty bit-sniffing. Worst of all from a Pappalardian perspective, the Borg-like Ummites have no sense of art, beauty or humour; no music, poetry or painting, only acts of creative public smell-mixing called "odour-concerts".

To make good art, one must possess an unconscious – but Peña's hive-mind ETs have neither hinterland nor privacy: their mushroom-shaped homes lack closable internal doors. Theirs is a "cellular sociology", their governments are not elected but chosen for their members' superior IQ scores, while the notion of money and private property is considered "a nonsense". Any needed objects are materialised and dissolved away into airy helium once used, as is fæces; no cupboards, washing-machines, dustbins or toilets today on Ummo. With no love or family-ties to speak of, "the rule of law would be considered as a rule of Nature", so rational did it all seem. Those who disagree are certified insane and used for medical experiments. Ummite names end in numbers, and there are no lively differences between regions, cultures or races, no myths, legends or dissenting opinions. Even their livestock are mind-controlled. Ummites milk dolphins and giant bats fitted with cerebral implants which make them "submit willingly" to their captivity, just like the Covid-believing human Earth-cattle mind-milked by Bill Gates's smartphones.

Post-*Risorgimento* Ummo is a fully globalised, Microsoft-compatible, NWO totalitarian health-dictatorship, as shown by the coldly logical Ummite attitude towards pandemics. Like Pappalardo, Peña eagerly pasted genuine news events into his grand Borgesian meta-narrative, including the weird case of Margarita Ruiz de Lihory, a Spanish aristocrat who defiled her daughter Margot's corpse by removing her right hand and eyeballs and shaving off her pubic hairs before preserving them all in jars as macabre relics following the girl's 1954 death from leukaemia. Evidently deranged, Lihory had also amassed a large collection of severed dog's heads, from whose throats rumour-mongers guessed smuggled drugs had been extracted following the animals' later occult sacrifice; but Peña preferred to blame vivisection-happy doctors from Ummo, his letters explaining how they had accidentally infected Margot with an alien plague which had entered into her hands, eyes and pubes; to prevent this *Andromeda Strain* spreading worldwide, Covid-style, the ETs had summarily chopped these unclean items off and sealed them away safely in Lihory's milk-jugs. Scarily, Ummo-believers in Borges's homeland of Argentina once set up a small private hospital devoted to curing patients via principles of Ummite science; you would not have wanted to be a patient there.[5]

Peña's Ummites would therefore seem unlikely to lend Pappalardo's artistic localist agenda their support at all. The explanation is obvious: *Il Generale* has probably not read very many actual Ummo letters and invented his tale of meeting Mr Humm wholesale, for misguided publicity purposes. His purported alien gods Xama and Thufer appear nowhere else in the Ummite corpus, and the name Walet Humm is wholly unlike the usual numbered monikers of his purported fellow aliens.[6]

On 4 June 2020, perhaps aiming to pre-empt mockery during his sudden ascent back to fame with his Orange Vest protests, Pappalardo admitted online that he had indeed made his whole Close Encounter up as "an artistic invention", a mere "narrative device conceived in the fictional framework" of his 2010 "novel that is not a real novel" which, it transpired, *was* a real novel after all – but one which still told the truth about how the world really worked anyway, or so the anti-*Risorgimento* agitator claimed.[7] But why should anyone still continue to believe him? Like both José Luis Jordán Peña and his ancient coprophagy-mandating bitch-queens of Ummo, Signor Pappalardo clearly believes some people will swallow any old shit.

NOTES

1 No idea whether he's any relation or not.

2 www-giornalettismo-com/antonio-pappalardo-lira-umbra/; www.emmereports.it/2021/04/27/gilet-arancioni-pietro-pappalardo-viviamo-in-un-paese-dove-le-verita-sono-nascoste/; www.nextquotidiano.it/in-umbria-grande-tristezza-il-generale-pappalardo-e-la-sua-lira-umbra-non-ce-la-fanno/; https://rivelazione.net/notizie/a-tutto-campo-con-il-generale-e-maestro-antonio-pappalardo-intervista-del-direttore-di-freedom-marco-magno/; www.globalist.it/news/2020/05/30/pappalardo-il-gilet-arancione-che-sostiene-che-covid-19-e-un-inganno-e-si-cura-con-lo-yoga-2059196.html; www.nextquotidiano.it/giovedi-10-maggio-pappalardo/; https://affaripolitici.it/tag/antonio-pappalardo/; www.niusdiario.es/internacional/antonio-pappalardo-chalecos-naranjas-italianos-entraremos-quirinal_18_2956545265.html; https://en.difesaonline.it/evidenza/interviste/intervista-esclusiva-al-generale-pappalardo-un-carabiniere-pensione-divenuto. Pappalardo only gained 587 votes during his unsuccessful 2020 local election campaign. Despite his admiration for Hjalmar Schacht, The General is not a Nazi himself, although his rallies do have an unfortunate tendency to attract people who are. Accordingly, he has boasted of having "kicked [such fascists] in the ass several times".

3 *Times*, 6 June 2020; www.queryonline.it/2020/06/08/la-strana-storia-del-generale-pappalardo-e-degli-ummitti/; www-nextquotidiano-it/pappalardo-alieno/; www.lapisnet.it/eventi/siracusa/l-utopia-dell-ummita-1.htm; www.ntacalabria.it/cosenza/cosenza-presentato-il-libro-lutopia-dellummita.html; www.sindacatosupu.it/civitella-di-licenza-il-monte-terra-degli-ummitti-presentazione-del-libro-lutopia-dellummita-di-walet-humm-transcritto-da-antonio-pappalardo-editore-morrone/; www.sindacatosupu.it/ https://traterraecielo.live/2017/02/03/uno-strano-racconto-sul-sito-del-s-u-p-u/

4 Eventually, witnesses who had never even heard of the Ummites began seeing their planetary seal – wholly invented by Peña – appear on the side of alleged real-life UFOs, notably in the famous Russian Voronezh case of 1989, which is exactly the kind of thing that happened in Borges's story, which tells of hoax encyclopædia entries about a fake world, Tlön, evidence of whose impossible existence later begins to appear in actual physical reality here on Earth. When asked in 1981 whether he himself believed in saucers, Borges proved open to the idea; the acronym of the UFO-club that posed the question was, in a highly Borgesian touch, FAECE – only the final 'S' was missing. See https://factorelblog.com/2014/09/11/el-senor-de-ummo-ha-muerto/

5 Antonio Ribera and Wendelle C Stevens, *UFO Contact from Planet Ummo* (text online at www.bibliotecapleyades.net/vida_alien/alien_ummites.htm#contents); https://confilegal.com/20170521-caso-la-mano-cortada-la-aristocrata-margarita-ruiz-lihory-le-corto-la-mano-le-saco-los-ojos-al-cadaver-hija/; https://magnet.xataka.com/un-mundo-fascinante/ummo-pedazo-historia-franquista-que-mezclo-ovnis-sectas-disecciones-e-incluso-a-villarejo; www.planetabenitez.com/prensa/ummo6.htm; https://mysteriousuniverse.org/2019/02/speak-louder-asked-the-aliens-from-planet-ummo/

6 Peña coined 'Ummo' from a Spanish word for smoke, '*humo*', slyly suggesting the whole thing was an empty smokescreen; did Pappalardo christen his own alien 'Humm' for similar reasons? The Italian word for 'human', '*uomo*', sounds very like 'Ummo', conceivably making his book's original Italian title, *L'Utopia Dell'Ummita*, punningly translatable as *The Utopia of Humanity* (*umanità*) – i.e. The General's own human fantasy, not Humm's alien one. Etymologically, it must always be recalled that 'Utopia' means 'No-Place'.

7 www.zanzarepublic.it/media/il-generale-pappalardo-le-origini-la-zanzara-462020

THE WORLD OF STRANGE PHENOMENA

ForteanTimes

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Our nostalgia for the weird

Andy Paciorek explores the terminology of folk horror, hauntology and the eco-eerie, and two authors' choices of the stranger cultural entertainment of the last few decades

Ghost of an Idea

Hauntology, Folk Horror and the Spectre of Nostalgia

William Burns

Headpress 2025

Pb, 286pp, £19.99, ISBN 9781915316318

Albion's Eco-Eerie

TV and Movies of the Haunted Generations

Phil Smith

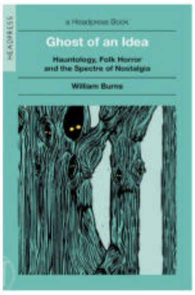
Temporal Boundary Press 2024

Pb, 133pp £9.99, temporalboundary.bigcartel.com/

As the number of books about folk horror and hauntology is considerably increasing, focus falls now upon a quest for a unique selling point – the tone and angle of scrutiny as well as which particular examples are concentrated upon. With *Ghost of an Idea* the aspect of nostalgia is the point of interest, whereas *Albion's Eco-Eerie* looks at the political and ecological aspects of "othering" in its selection. Both books follow in the footsteps of the late author and theorist Mark Fisher, particularly his 2017 posthumous release *The Weird and The Eerie*.

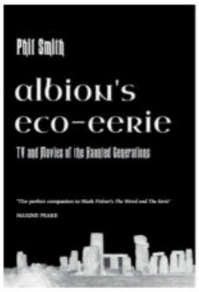
Ghost of an Idea covers a range of media – film, literature, music – and as such can be something of a mixed bag. At times it reads like an academic tome (and would prove very useful for anyone studying the subject matter at university) and at others like a more mass-market book on the cultural entertainment examples – and at this it excels as it provides a very useful list of films and music – a good proportion of it straying from the well-beaten track. I question its inclusion of interviews and concert reviews and wonder if they would have been better placed in a separate volume as I feel they break Burns's central flow. His discussion of nostalgia is interesting and I would have welcomed more of a deeper dive at times, but in his consideration of whether the past is harming or revitalising the creation of horror media in the 21st century he asks some timely and pertinent questions.

Phil Smith seeks an alternative reading of TV and movies of the Haunted Generations suggesting looking at the media in terms of "unhuman characters, the materials and the edgeland spaces". He suggests the term "hobgoblinology" but I question whether that is necessary as the "eco-eerie" term he uses in the book's title does a much better job of specifically conveying the centre of attention. If the use of a term helps the writer unlock what he wants to say in the book, then it's a useful tool, but going forward I don't know if there is a need for any further terminology within the gamut of topics. I enjoyed reading Smith just talk about his selected subjects more than about the terminology and application of it, which I felt disrupted the flow a little. I have personally discovered with labels that they have a limited purpose – they only need to point in a direction rather than map a territory down to the millimetre. Sometimes too much definition risks stifling and suffocating further creativity in the crib, while a net cast too widely can serve no real purpose. Further labelling may be best reserved for supermarket shelves and the toes of mortuary corpses. I fully understand that as wider interest in the sub-genres/modes have grown that the terms "folk horror" and "hauntology" may carry some baggage or alternatively are limiting, but I don't feel that the remedy is more terminology. That said, for the purpose of this book the term "eco-eerie" alone is ideal.



> *He suggests using the term "hobgoblinology" but "eco-eerie" does a much better job*

As with Burns's concentration on nostalgia, Smith's focus on the estrangement between humankind and nature when looking at specific examples is an intriguing vantage point to take. Smith adds an "s" to the end of Bob Fischer's term "Haunted Generation" to take us back before Generation X's particularly spectre-ridden childhoods (a demographic that also seems particularly attuned to Burns's predilection for a nostalgia that is part warm and fuzzy and part traumatised by monsters).


Phil Smith
albion's eco-eerie
TV and Movies of the Haunted Generations
"The perfect companion to Mark Fisher's The Weird and The Eerie"
MAXINE PEAKE

It is always interesting to see which specific examples books like those of Burns and Smith concentrate upon. With *Ghost of An Idea*, I especially enjoyed the discussions about *Twin Peaks, The Blair Witch Project, The Shining, Sinister, A Christmas Carol* and possibly my favourite *Twilight Zone* episode, "A Stop at Willoughby". Some of Burns's choices, however, such as *Star Wars* and *Toy Story* feel somewhat incongruous to me and I would have preferred either their omission and a shorter book or greater discussion of other more haunting and reflective examples.

Smith's book, as the title suggests, mainly concentrates its attention on British examples (some creations from other countries are discussed at times in comparison) and again there's a nice range of choices including *The Company of Wolves, Oh Lucky Man!, Whistle and I'll Come to You*; and the work of Nigel Kneale (who is currently enjoying a long renaissance of interest) is covered well, particularly regarding one of his lesser-discussed creations, *The Quatermass Xperiment*.

One of the strongest sections in the book for me is where Smith discusses the strange 1975 children's television series *The Changes*. This curious show is possibly the epitome of Albion's Eco-eerie, though I must admit that whilst I enjoyed watching that programme I was never as much a fan of its conclusion and its explanation as I was of what came before in earlier episodes.

Both books cover numerous other examples, but they are best suited for people with a prior interest in the subject matter, and as research/reference tools for students and film/culture writers. Whilst there are good recommendations of media to check out in both, for a heftier and lighter-toned introduction to the vast range of Haunted Generation material I would recommend Stephen Brotherstone and Dave Lawrence's *Scarred for Life* books.

Burns ★★★★
Smith ★★★★

Tales of everyday magic

This is stuffed to the gills with stories of those who consulted England's service magicians

Cunning Folk

Life in the Era of Practical Magic

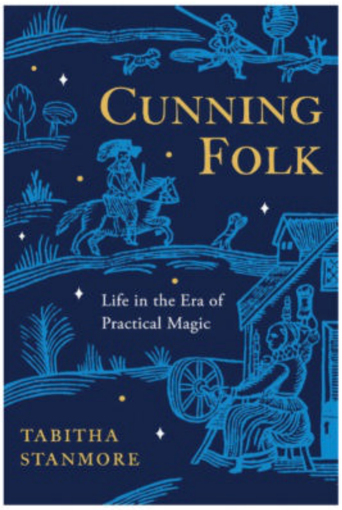
Tabitha Stanmore

Bodley Head 2024

Hb, 288pp, £20, ISBN 9781847927316

If you need advice on finding lost valuables, identifying thieves, saving lives, matters of the heart, taking vengeance against your irritating neighbours, getting rich quick, providing stage illusions, winning in court, or even how to secure your rightful place in the kingdom, then Tabitha Stanmore's 2024 Folklore Society Katharine Briggs Award-winning book *Cunning Folk: Life in the Era of Practical Magic* may be the right place to start.

Drawn from Stanmore's scholarly research, this highly readable book is stuffed to the gills with stories of those – rich and poor, educated and ignorant – who consulted one of the many hundreds of English service magicians (cunning folk) who plied their trade between the 14th and 17th centuries.



Her book offers the reader a wonderful taste of the desires and demands of everyday life, from claustrophobic hamlets to densely populated city centres.

Magic, as Stanmore defines it, was a "fallback option" to harness powers when life goes awry, and a "rational part of the supernatural universe in which they lived", and crucially, these practical experts were seldom confused with harmful witches.

All the stories are fascinating. For example, Stanmore follows the fortunes of Mabel Gray in 1637 who, on the advice of her neighbours, consulted first one and then another practical magician to find the whereabouts of her valuable lost spoons. A perilous journey follows into the narrow and disreputable streets of London, where Gray was told – for a considerable fee – that the spoons remained in the house, although whether they were eventual recovered is unknown.

It is not revealed to us why this case ended up in court, but these traces in ecclesiastical and secular court records provide access to these beliefs and practices today, and spans the shift from church to state judiciary through the Reformation.

The conclusion is the least satisfying section. In bringing the concept of magic up to date through superstition, it downplays the continued role of magic and magical thinking in a supposedly disenchanted modern world, in capitalism, politics and occulture.

Nevertheless, Stanmore's thoroughly researched book is intriguing, with endnotes and a select bibliography to follow up any stories.

It provides valuable insights about histories of magicality: it shows the spectrum of material wealth and social status of those who consulted cunning folk, and the diverse range of clients from the clergy to the laity.

This book demonstrates how magic was integrated into all elements of public and private lives. *Cunning Folk* is a page-turner, and tells an absorbing social history beyond the stories of the supernatural.

Helen Cornish

★★★★★

Forbidden Science 6

Scattered Castles: The Journals of Jacques Vallee, 2010-2019

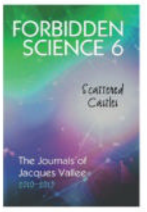
Jacques Vallee

Anomalist Books 2025

Pb, 554pp, £22.99, ISBN 9781949501360

Someday someone will produce a biography of French-American ufologist Jacques Vallee. It will join already published companions on the lives of other towering figures such as Fort, Keyhoe, McDonald and Hynek. To anyone who's followed his unique career, it will be a page-turner.

Meanwhile, in a massive effort to register his side of the story, we have six volumes of Vallee's journals, published over three decades. In this latest volume (from which 100 pages could easily have been shaved) Vallee updates developments within his well-heeled, prestigiously-employed social circle. Along the way we get sideways glances at cases and recurring rumours of sinister official shenanigans.



Vallee earned his fortune in Silicon Valley as a computer genius and venture capitalist. No sensible observer doubts his manifest intelligence and inventive imagination. His corporate connections figure in these pages, as they must. Most readers, however, will be here for the UFOs. In that, they are likely to be disappointed. They may wish he had produced a less self-focused book in favour of a broader overview of the lively UFO situation of the 21st century.

For me, the book triggered occasional wistful thoughts of other moments in the Vallee saga, including the thrilling, paradigm-shifting *Passport to Magonia* (1969). In part this was a fierce assault on ufology's then-dominant extraterrestrial hypothesis, even while an expansive vision can still be argued if one heeds Arthur C Clarke's dictum about advanced technology and apparent magic. In retrospect, its importance lies in its penetrating insights, amply validated since, into the phenomenon's underlying, unsettling strangeness.

As one who's lived his life in another ufology – the one defined by the Center for UFO Studies along with a host of bright independent inquirers far removed from Vallee's head-nodding associates – Vallee rarely mentions us without an all-but-audible snarl – I found *Forbidden Science 6* to be, if sporadically annoying, unexpectedly un-engaging. Less unexpectedly, paranoid; as has been part of the package since *Messengers of Deception* (1979), Vallee subscribes to what may strike sophisticated readers as conspiracy theories.

Lamentably for a pioneering explorer in ufology's otherworld, he has chosen to close out his career with *Trinity*, a series of co-authored volumes, three so far, advocating for a crashed-disc claim widely thought – outside the Vallee camp anyway – to be a hoax, The initial stages of that misadventure are hinted at near the conclusion of *Forbidden 6*. (Investigative journalist Douglas D Johnson's withering findings are available on line.) The book is deeply flawed, but Vallee remains an important figure, and there's material in here to guide future historians and biographers.

Jerome Clark

★★★

Sick Houses

Haunted Houses and the Architecture of Dread

Leila Taylor

Repeater Books 2025

Pb, 240pp, £10.99, ISBN 9781915672636

Leila Taylor, who works at Brooklyn Public Library in New York, wrote the excellent *Darkly: Black History and America's Gothic Soul* in 2019. Her new book repeats the same engaging mixture of analysis of American horror fiction and film alongside cultural history and, in this case, legendary "true" stories of haunted houses that have haunted the American imagination.

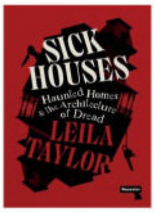
The book has studies of *The Amityville Horror, Psycho, Hereditary* and numerous episodes of *The Twilight Zone*, alongside reflections on the gruesome allure of Ed Gein's farmhouse, decorated with bodies he had raided from cemeteries in the 1950s. Taylor weaves in the tangled history of architect Frank Lloyd Wright's Ennis House in Los Angeles, a gloomy Mayan-style bunker often used in Hollywood films, and considers the cabin where the

Unabomber built his bombs (now stored in an FBI facility).

There is a compelling rehearsal of the story of the Winchester House, the eccentric experiment in compulsive building by the heir to the Winchester rifle fortune, commonly said to have built a labyrinth of over 150 rooms to avoid the tormented souls of the victims of her gun.

The book ends with Taylor's own ambiguous haunted apartment experience in a New York block, the facts of the case left suspended in a suitably fortean state of ambiguity.

Sick Houses is in six chapters, each of which elegantly clusters together variations on a chosen theme. These always manage to mix familiar examples with inventive left-field choices. She largely steers away from too much discussion of Gothic architecture, which has been well covered, and instead explores Brutalist Modernist spaces from the early Universal horror *Black Cat* (1934), via JG Ballard's *High-Rise* (1975) and David Cronenberg's *Shivers* (1975), but places these in dialogue with the utopias-gone-bad of post-war social housing estates, including the notorious Pruitt-Igoe estate in America, which was built in the 1950s and blown up as an irretrievable ghetto in 1972.



There are chapters on witch houses, survivalist bunkers, and on uncanny dolls houses or miniatures. The last of these does a great job of pointing out just how many miniatures have featured in recent films, from the mainstream TV series *Sharp Objects* to the more obscure horror films, *David Isn't Real* or *Amityville Dollhouse*.

The book is an accessible piece of cultural study, arguing that haunted house stories are the most unnerving "because our homes are our second bodies, the epidermis of our externalised selves". She doesn't cover "sick building syndrome" or have much to say about the particular emotional state of "dread", as the title might promise, but it is always full of sparkling insights and surprising juxtapositions.

Roger Luckhurst

★★★★★

A History of Military Encounters with UFOs

Explanations and Combat Strategies

Robert Allred

Air World/Pen & Sword 2024

Hb, 280pp, £25, ISBN 9781399063760

This is a very annoying book. In the second line of the introduction Robert Allred explains that the British and US governments use the term UAP, standing for Unexplained Aerial Phenomena. It should actually be Unidentified Aerial (or Anomalous) Phenomena.

The first few chapters cover 19th-century phantom airships and UFOs of the First World War and Allred acknowledges the alleged dogfight between the Red Baron and a UFO is a hoax. There is a sensible discussion of the Foo Fighters of the Second World War, and he notes the 1942 "Battle of Los Angeles" was a case of mistaken identity and war nerves. He also goes on to state that the Scandinavian ghost rocket scare of 1946 was the product of political tensions between the East and West and that it was largely media-inspired.

So far this is a reasonable evaluation of the subject, but then Allred states he "will not repeat every ridiculous claim by government agencies; superficial media outlets; uninformed and ignorant scribblers who gloss-over facts and substitute irrelevant items such as witnesses being in an agitated state, etc; professional skeptics whose psychological makeup prevents them from taking an honest look at UFO/UAP incidents." Ouch!

A HISTORY OF MILITARY ENCOUNTERS with UFOs
EXPLANATIONS and COMBAT STRATEGIES
ROBERT ALLRED

With that statement Allred allows himself to wallow in the speculation that terrestrial radar made one or more alien ships crash at Roswell. Captain Mantell probably saw an alien spacecraft that caused him to crash to his death, because US Air Force officers would not mistake a secret balloon for a UFO. We get the Broadlands incident where a UFO was seen on Lord Mountbatten's estate, UFOs attacking aircraft and missiles and visiting USAF nuclear sites. Then, inevitably, we get the Rendlesham incident which he believes was a genuine close encounter after dismissing the debunkers who have used fallacious and maliciously invented facts to discredit it.

Worldwide military UFO encounters are surveyed and sightings by astronauts and cosmonauts are included; he repeats several flimsy stories and resorts to saying he cannot disbelieve so many reports by space explorers. That quantity-over-quality argument runs throughout this book, often propped up by the same superficial sources debunkers are accused of using.

Then we get the Cash/Landrum case: was Betty Cash killed by a UFO? The Kecksburg crash, Flight 1628, MH370, Valentich's disappearance, crop circles, cattle mutilations and alien abductions are all mixed into the pot.

As evidence of Allred's dispassionate study of UAPs, he admits he was sceptical of the Linda Napolitano abduction case, but after reading *Witnessed* by Budd Hopkins he now believes it is true.

There is a load of twaddle about the aims and abilities of the aliens and in the discussion he approvingly mentions the Red Baron case that he earlier and rightly dismissed.

If UFOs/alien craft have visited us since at least the 19th century, this must be the slowest invasion of all time. And there's no index.

Nigel Watson

★★

The Magic Books

A History of Enchantment in 20 Medieval Manuscripts

Anne Lawrence-Mathers

Yale University Press 2025

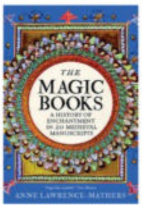
Hb, 368pp, £30, ISBN 9780300244434

Part of the "material turn" in recent history-writing has been to make historians regard manuscripts as physical objects as well as texts. Anne Lawrence-Mathers, a respected scholar of mediæval magic, now applies this development to her field, by leading the reader through a close study of 20 mediæval manuscripts dealing with astrology, divination and ceremonial magic, contextualised by references to scores more. The documents selected span the period from the ninth to the 15th century, and are drawn from all over Western Europe and a proportionately large number of archives.

Three things are achieved in the process. One is to introduce her audience to the works concerned, and explain their contents in (often painstaking and technical) detail. A second is to compare them with similar works, to build up a picture of the state of particular genres of occult enquiry and practice at particular periods. A third is to provide an impression of the character of mediæval magic as a whole.

One overwhelming conclusion is reached as a result of that last enterprise: that despite consistent condemnations of the study and practice of magic by leading churchmen all through the Middle Ages, both continued to thrive. This was partly because mediæval intellectuals had as much trouble as modern historians in deciding what magic actually was: astrology shaded imperceptibly into astronomy, everybody agreed that it was possible to make some predictions by studying the natural world, and it was similarly permitted to deal with spirits as long as they were angels and you did not conjure them.

In addition, however, there remained a thriving counterculture which simply chose to disregard orthodoxy on the matter, arguing for example that even summoning demons was legitimate if they were forced to serve good purposes. Moreover, if any of this stuff *did* work, ambitious rulers wanted the benefits.



As a result, official denunciations and manuscripts of magic multiply together as the Middle Ages go on, the works concerned often being owned by kings and aristocrats and produced to the highest literary and artistic values, and translated into vernacular languages to increase their audience.

The result of this is the existence and survival of so many of the beautiful and sophisticated objects that grace the pages of this splendidly illustrated book.

Ronald Hutton

★★★★★

Food folklore, queer folklore

These themed folklore books are entertaining, says **Ross MacFarlane**, but they are too rooted in the past and miss some opportunities

A Feast of Folklore

The Bizarre Stories Behind British Food

Ben Gazur

Unbound 2024

Hb, 272pp, £16.99, ISBN 9781800183162

Queer as Folklore

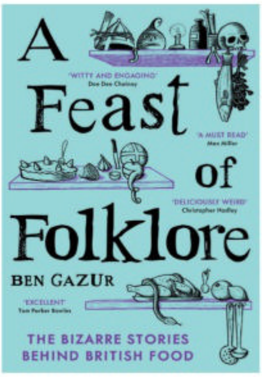
The Hidden Queer History of Myths and Monsters

Sacha Coward

Unbound 2024

Hb, 352pp, £18.99, ISBN 9781800183360

Ben Gazur sets out that *A Feast of Folklore* will "examine some of the weirder traditions and beliefs about food which make Britain such a fruitful place to study Folklore". He's as good as his word, offering up to the reader accounts of medicinal food, local festivals and customs and even food and drink divination (anyone for a spot of tyromancy?).



It's a heady mix and makes for a book that whilst entertaining and enjoyable, has a style and structure that – to use some culinary metaphors Gazur often indulges in – is easier to sample in bite-sized chunks than to consume in one sitting.

A few ideas drawn from more academic studies could have been added to the mix without deviating too far from Gazur's conversational style. He progresses through food type (Fruit Lore, Vegetable Lore, Meat Lore and so on) but the similarities in Gazur's accounts – regularly hair is removed from a sick person, passed on for an animal to eat whilst the patient recovers – are never commented on. A lost opportunity then – in comparing these similarities he would have been able to point out the hidden wiring of tale-telling.

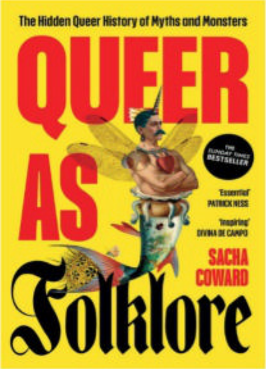
Gazur may have it that Britain is a great place to study folklore, but his Britain is mostly of the past. Most of the book consists of sources from the late 19th and early 20th centuries – understandable, given the growth of folklore collecting during this time – but there are few contemporary references. Gazur gives the great example of the giving of birthday cakes as an act of folklore – a perfect example which shows folklore is alive and well (and hidden in plain sight). However, by focusing so much on examples from the past, it plays up the image of folklore being about outdated and curious practices and the study of it having nothing to say about contemporary life – a particular disappointment as the study of the social and cultural contexts of food (known as "Foodways"), is a dynamic and active subject of modern academic (especially folklore) research.

It's a shame then, that the book doesn't feature more examples of the folklore and traditions of food from 21st-century Britain and what that might say about modern society. What of traditions associated with, say, curries or kebabs? Naans and Nandos? Are there none? Or are the sources for them harder to find?

If *A Feast…* harks back to the past, Sacha Coward's *Queer as Folklore* appears perfectly aligned to ideas of identity in contemporary Britain. It's a book that utilises the techniques and tools of Queer Studies to excavate (to quote its subtitle), "The Hidden Queer History of Myths and Monsters". Initially focusing on mythological creatures – for example, unicorns and mermaids – that have been adopted into LGBTQ+ culture, the book widens out to look at how notions of shapeshifting creatures and ideas of the occult have been drawn upon in the construction of identities by members of LGBTQ+ communities. These sections will be surprising to some – well-known to others – but an important and necessary read to anyone with an interest in monsters and lore.

Coward's book is less convincing when it moves away from myths and legends. A section arguing for the queerness of the piracy tradition in the 16th and 17th centuries feels out of kilter with the rest of the book. He is rightly careful in not judging the past by the standards of the present, raising in his introduction the dangers in assuming the gender or sexuality of our ancestors. Coward however falls foul of this – labelling with no evidence the Victorian writer Andrew Lang as a "homosexual scholar".

Just like *A Feast of Folklore*, *Queer as Folklore* raises questions about the nature of popular folklore books and what does and doesn't feature within them. Coward's focus is – mostly – myths and legends, but when contemporary LGBTQ+ life enters the frame, it suggests how folklore could be used to interpret it (to take one example, Coward's overview of "the animal-based terminology in contemporary queer parlance").



Whilst commendable reads, these books illustrate what folklore is commonly seen as (old tales from the past) rather than what it can be (a method of understanding the present).

Gazur ★★★
Coward ★★★

Catching Cryptids

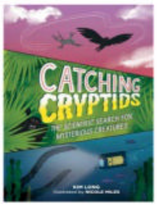
The Scientific Search for Mysterious Creatures

Kim Long, illus Nicole Miles

Running Press Kids 2025

Hb, 144pp, £14.99, ISBN 9780762485758

Catching Cryptids is a great example of how not to be condescending to children. It talks to kids as equals in an engaging way that can capture their interest. Most books on cryptozoology aimed at the junior market are forgettable; this one is different. There is a solid introduction to fire kids' imagination and an interesting list of animals once thought to be extinct but that were rediscovered. The list also gives the amount of time these animals were "lost".



The three main parts look at cryptids of the water, the air and the land. Two main creatures are selected for each category with a list of some others. For each of the main creatures some cutting-edge technology is suggested for the hunt, including drones, baited remote underwater video systems, eDNA analysis, bioacoustics and camera traps. Some of these may be beyond the budget of most kids but some, like camera traps, have become quite affordable. A "search protocol", a numbered step-by-step guide to searching for each creature, is a good idea.

Some of the creature choices, like the Mongolian deathworm and the ahool are good and not the same old creatures rolled out elsewhere, like Bigfoot and the Loch Ness Monster. Mothman is not such a good choice as it seems not to be a cryptid (an undiscovered species) but some kind of paranormal entity.

There are some errors: that the puff adder is the most venomous snake (it's actually the inland taipan) and that bats have poor eyesight (they have excellent sight alongside their sonar). My main criticism is that most of the creatures are from North America; there is a plethora of cryptids around the world to choose from.

However this is a great introduction to the field and will hopefully inspire the cryptozoologists of the future to make discoveries.

Richard Freeman

★★★

SCIENCE FICTION AND FANTASY

DAVID V BARRETT **ROUNDS UP THE LATEST TITLES FROM THE WORLD OF SPECULATIVE AND FANTASTIC FICTION**

Troll: A Love Story

Johanna Sinisalo

Pushkin Press 2024
Pb, 285pp, £9.99, ISBN 9781805331346

Translated from the award-winning Finnish original, *Troll: A Love Story* has something for just about every FT reader: cryptozoologists, naturalists, folklorists… A young photographer, Angel, comes across some kids tormenting something; he chases them away, and finds a young troll, which he takes back to his flat. Trolls have only been accepted as real creatures rather than folk-tales for a few years, and almost nothing is known about them. Over the weeks, Angel gradually learns how to care for the troll, building up a relationship with it, while at the same time negotiating both his working life, doing photo shoots for an ad agency, and his somewhat chaotic gay sex life; all three strands become entangled as the narrative progresses. This is truly a beautiful story; the sub-title says it all, on so many levels.

Pagans

James Alistair Henry

Moonflower Books 2025
Hb, 325pp, £16.99, ISBN 9781916678064

In *Pagans*, by TV comedy writer James Alistair Henry (*Green Wing* and others), the 21st-century island of Britain is divided into tribal areas: Saxons in the east, Celts in the west and the Nordic kingdom of Scotland. A high-level conference is about to start in London on the possibility of uniting all of these into a United Kingdom, but the three groups are deeply distrustful of each other at both a grassroots and a political level. When one of the Celtic negotiators is found nailed to a tree in Epping Forest, Police Captain Aedith Mercia and Celtic Tribal Detective Inspector Drustan are thrown together to solve the murder. There are lots of delightful touches, like the names Aedith gives to her vehicles and weapons, and Drustan writing up his police report in poetry. But at times the tribal differences and the distrust and petty prejudices between the groups seem a little forced; you'd think, after all these centuries, they would have come to a bit more of an accommodation than they have. "Our world" placenames such as Epping Forest, Hyde Park and the Isle of Sheppey jar quite badly, despite actually being Saxon in origin. But the characters and the plot are fun and well worked out; an engaging read.

South Parks

Chris Roberts

F&M Publications 2024
Pb, 167pp, £9.99, ISBN 9780957213487

South Parks is a delightful collection of short stories inspired by and set in and around the parks of south London. They're a mix of fantasy and folktale, with wisps of mythology from the many cultures that are part of London winding through them. There's a mermaid who swims in a lido in Brixton; a Korean toilet goddess (really!); a singing stone lion that fell off the *SS Great Eastern*; a compellingly beautiful riderless horse running along the Chelsea Embankment; a prostitute out of her time, near the Crossbones Graveyard in Southwark; an estate agent who sells houses near erotic ley lines; there's a story with talking flowers – but beware if you hear the bluebells ring… As well as the wealth of folktales he calls on, Roberts has an excellent ear for dialect; the voices of Londoners, Liverpudlians, Caribbeans and others ring out from the pages.

Marginal

Tom Carlisle

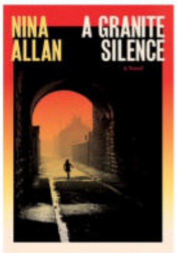
Titan Books 2024
Pb, 351pp, £9.99, ISBN 9781803360744

Tom Carlisle's *Marginal* feels like two different novels smashed together. Years ago the teenaged Rob managed to escape from a philosophical commune in an abandoned military base somewhere in the Scottish Highlands; it was highly controlling, with Scientology-like punishments for anyone displaying doubt. Years later (and after years of therapy) he receives a phone call from the group's leader: his elder brother is dead. Rob heads north with his friend Lucy, a TV journalist who wants to make a documentary about the group. So far so good. But when they find his brother's body, it's been torn apart by something. From then on the pace, initially quite slow but quietly menacing, becomes increasingly relentless as they encounter science-fictional monsters among them, and there's just one gruesome death after another. But each one is much the same as the previous one, and the second half of the novel really doesn't have much story beyond the commune's founder insisting that everything's okay when everyone else can see it clearly isn't. It's actually a relief when it comes to a climax and an end.

A Granite Silence

Nina Allan

Riverrun 2025
Hb, 352pp, £20, ISBN 9781529435573



In 1934 an eight-year-old schoolgirl in Aberdeen went home for lunch and her mother sent her to buy a loaf of bread from a shop a few minutes away. But she never returned. The following day her body was found in the stairwell of the tenement block where she lived. That's the bare bones of a real-life murder. In *A Granite Silence* Nina Allen explores the story from every angle, using police records, court transcripts, newspaper reports. She examines every detail, every person involved, in the most minute detail. But she does something else. She involves herself as a character, investigating the case; but she also has other characters, other writers – fictionalised versions of herself? – investigating it at different times, from different angles.

This book is a study of the very essence of writing. "Every true account – essays and journalism, media reportage, film footage, even personal letters – is in some sense fiction, the partial version of reality that is inevitably the product of the subjective mind. Every fiction is in some sense true, because it has actually taken place inside the head of its creator." She tells stories about the real people involved. One, nearly 50 pages long, is about the forensic scientist who provided tiny but crucial evidence at the trial: the character was real, his situation was real; but the storyline she tells about him "is my own invention". Yet her fictional story about a minor participant in a murder case turns his name on a piece of paper into a real, rounded person. Allan's factual accounts and her fictional stories are equally in my memory now; and perhaps that was her point. Excellent.

Life Drawing

Jaime Hernandez

Fantagraphics 2024
Hb, 140pp, £24.99, ISBN 9798875000492

In *Life Drawing*, Jaime Hernandez brings together one of his original (and most loved) *Love & Rockets* characters, Maggie, with a more recent character, Tonta. Maggie is now well into middle-age and settled; Tonta is late teens, with her best friend deserting her to go off to university. Their storylines, made up from 30 separate stories, are sometimes separate and sometimes interwoven. Tonta (her nickname is Spanish for dumb or stupid) is a bit naive and awkward, but is utterly honest and true at heart (unlike her sexy but appalling older half-sisters in every respect). She takes life-drawing classes and has a bit of a crush on her teacher, Ray Gomez, who she eventually realises is living with Maggie – who when they first met, Tonta had angrily accused of stealing her sun-hat. It's all made more complicated by the fact that both Maggie and Ray had flings with one of Tonta's half-sisters in the past… Great fun.

REVIEWS / FILMS

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The joint was jumping...

Ryan Coogler delivers his best film yet in a music-drenched period piece pitching Mississippi bluesmen and gangsters against vampires; plus a smart, twisted take on a fairy tale classic...

Sinners

Dir Ryan Coogler, US 2025
In cinemas

After his box office successes with Marvel's *Black Panther* films and the *Rocky* spin-off *Creed* and its sequels, writer/director Ryan Coogler was given a blank cheque for his next project, and the filmmaker decided to go in an entirely different direction from his previous productions with the Jim Crow era vampire thriller *Sinners*.

Getting the story from the perspective of newcomer Miles Caton's aspiring bluesman Sammie, we are introduced to Michael B Jordan doing double duty as the Smokestack Twins, a pair of gangsters who return to their hometown of Clarksdale, Mississippi, with their pockets full of money and a truck full of booze.

Entrepreneurial and with no time to waste, the twins quickly seek out friends and family to get the last things they need for their new juke joint, which they are setting up in an old mill they just bought.

As people start to arrive and the music begins playing, the party atmosphere grows and everyone is having the time of their lives; but when three strangers show up and ask to be let into the establishment, there is understandable suspicion about why three white people want to be let into a black establishment – and it soon becomes clear that these suspicions are warranted when all hell breaks loose.

> *The soundtrack is sublime, and is almost a character in its own right*

What starts out as a period piece turns into an intense standoff between the juke joint revellers and the vampires besieging them outside, and it is a stunningly thrilling, sensual and emotional spectacle.

Spending its first hour introducing its players, their motivations and backgrounds, the film has a rich and nuanced character gallery, with not a single performance falling flat at any point, ensuring that the viewer can easily remain engaged throughout the film's substantial 137-minute runtime.

The soundtrack is sublime, and is almost a character in its own right, as the musical landscape builds and expands to underline everything that unfolds on the screen, following a journey from African rhythms to blues through rock 'n' roll to funk and hip hop, never feeling intrusive or misplaced in relation to the setting or the narrative.

Saturated with ancestral magic, the film is unapologetic in its expression and subtext, the depth of which may be lost on some, as the film burns so brightly as a cinematic spectacle that its deeper concerns never weigh the whole thing down; however, these subtextual currents are present in abundance for those in the know.

As such, there is much more to *Sinners* than your average vampire film, since the traditional horror elements associated with the genre take a backseat in favour of exceptional storytelling, but there are still plenty of thrills and scares to be found throughout.

Even with his more mainstream efforts, Coogler has always had a distinct voice as a filmmaker, and with *Sinners* he delivers his finest project to date with a film that is brimming with excellence and sincerity.

Leyla Mikkelsen

★★★★★

The Ugly Stepsister

Dir Emilie Blichfeldt, Norway 2025
On digital platforms

Cinderella remains one of the best-known of all fairy tales, and there have been many adaptations through the years for both stage and screen. In Emilie Blichfeldt's *The Ugly Stepsister*, we approach the classic tale from a different perspective: namely that of one of Cinderella's stepsisters, Elvira (Lea Myren), as we follow her painful quest for beauty.

Naive to a fault, Elvira spends her days pining for Prince Julian (Isac Calmroth), obsessively reading his poetry collections and innocently daydreaming about romance. However, when her new stepfather dies after wedding Elvira's mother (Ane Dahl Torp), the family falls on hard times, and with all fair maidens being invited to a ball at the castle, the impressionable Elvira is thrust into a harrowing transformation by her opportunistic mother, slowly robbing her of her innocence, and causing a drastic deterioration in both her mental and physical health.

Darkly satirical, *The Ugly Stepsister* touches on the often grim aspects of the beauty industry and the lengths women are expected to go in order to be deemed desirable, their worth being tied to a narrow set of beauty standards that eschew their value as individuals, the absurdity only being emphasised by how the objects of their desire are often rather hideous beneath their visually appealing veneer.

Myren plays the part with subtle wit and a compelling vulnerability, and the players around her fulfil the roles of various archetypes, their arcs adding texture to a story that is centred on its eponymous character and her tragic journey.

Sincerely subversive, *The Ugly Stepsister* packs quite the punch when it comes to body horror, however, it never loses sight of its core narrative or Elvira's emotional plight. Instead, the body horror is dispersed throughout the film, lulling the viewer into a false sense of security; the shocks are small and brief at first, but their frequency and severity continue to escalate before climaxing in a finale many will struggle to stomach.

In 2024, *The Substance* took audiences and critics alike by storm, and Blichfeldt's film has plenty to add to the conversation, not only in terms of commentary on the often absurd expectations put on women's appearance, but about Blichfeldt as a filmmaker, her voice securing her a place among other impactful women of body horror such as Coralie Fargeat and Julia Ducournau.

Leyla Mikkelsen

★★★★☆

TELEVISION

FT's couch potatoes, STU NEVILLE & RUTH MORRIS assess the small screen's current fortean offerings

If your bag is thermal imaging, mud-trudging and trekking through the wilderness in search of elusive beasts, then *Expedition Bigfoot* (Discovery) is a natural go-to. Season 5 opens as it means to go on with the continuing high-octane adventures of Dr Mireya Major, Bryce Johnson and Russell Acord, this time in NorCal and split into two, with primatologist Mireya and researcher Bryce opting for the dense forest around their base camp and Russell – ex-US military, survivalist and owner of the world's largest rucksack – opting for altitude. As before, the passion and professionalism of the team is palpable and there are clearly no lengths, widths or indeed heights to which they won't go to in their pursuit of Bigfoot, with Bryce in a high-tech surveillance tent made of EMF-blocking material, Mireya up trees and Russell (and his cameraman) faced with a rampaging river ravine that must be crossed at all costs. After a dazzling piece of ropework that makes Indiana Jones look like an amateur wrangler, Russell lassos a tree and the daring duo zip across the water and start ascending. While nature's challenges can't stop him, a creepy cabin in the woods does, and Russell is quickly scraping the floorboards for flakes of a bloodlike substance, promptly deposited in the obligatory zip-lock bag.

Darkness descends and powerful howls (not the howls of owls) are heard

Back at basecamp, Mireya and Bryce discover intriguing hairs (not the hairs of bears), bent trees and a big footprint; items are bagged, tagged or cast and sent for analysis. Darkness descends, powerful howls (not the howls of owls) are heard, and the team whip out a mini-air raid siren emitting an alleged recording of a Bigfoot yowl, the aim of which is to tempt the creature into revealing itself. While the yowls bring no more howls (or even owls) the team is nonetheless rewarded by the discovery of a fish trap made by something with opposable thumbs. Unbeknownst to them at the time, their bodycams capture a furry head peeking around a tree trunk before quickly withdrawing from shot. Although it's impossible for Bryce to make the image clearer, it's undeniably something tall and hairy!

Mireya enlists Tobe Johnson, bio-acoustic researcher and expert on howls, yowls and honks, while Bryce consults Isaac, elder of the local Hoopa tribe, who tells of a network of caves in which they believe 'The Boss of the Woods' abides. Bryce gets Russell on the case, but now, as throughout, a storm is brewing, which threatens to put paid to the entire expedition. Undeterred, Russell powers on, his stoicism paying off with ape-like grunting and thermal image of a bipedal creature scurrying down the hill with Russell, his rucksack and cameraman in hot pursuit through dicey terrain. Asked what to do if you encounter one, Isaac's advice – "Walk away. Walk away." – is clearly the last thing Expedition Bigfoot intend to do, which is a relief to these Couch Potatoes. For all the fun, this is actually one of the best shows out there.

Four Flies on Grey Velvet

Dir Dario Argento, Italy 1971
Shameless Blu-ray and 4K UHD

Being the third film in Argento's celebrated 'animal' trilogy, following *The Bird With the Crystal Plumage* and *Cat O'Nine Tails*.

For the uninitiated, Argento is renowned as a director of giallo films – a type of thriller with very defined elements that takes its name from the yellow covers of pulp crime novels in Italy. Essentially a whodunnit, the giallo generally has a series of murders committed by a masked or fleetingly-seen villain who uses a cruel or unusual method of dispatching his victims and is not unmasked until the climax. The hero, sometimes a journalist or a relative of the first victim, struggles to identify the culprit but hits on a key clue just before the end, leading to a final confrontation. Having said all that, what sets the giallo apart from more mainstream thrillers is that the plot is merely a vehicle for a series of stylish and often violent set-piece sequences, set to soundtracks by the likes of Ennio Morricone, Riz Ortolani and Stelvio Cipriani.

Four Flies on Grey Velvet is a classic of the genre. A drummer in a rock band (Michael Brandon) believes he has accidentally killed a man who was stalking him. Soon after, he is taunted and terrorised by someone who witnessed the crime. As far as the story goes, that's it. The murder sequences occur at regular intervals and then there's a big finish.

While typical of the genre, this film is not exactly typical of Argento. For one thing it has a very dark æsthetic, in contrast to the brilliant colour and outrageous set design he is known for. In one of the extras Luigi Cozzi (Argento's assistant on this film, and later a director in his own right) explains that Argento had wanted to experiment with exceptionally dark sequences, noting that pure black is notoriously difficult to show on film. Another gem from the extras is the fact that Deep Purple were sought to provide the film's music. Apparently deals were done, contracts were signed and it was all going ahead until a SNAFU prevented it from happening. Argento went to Morricone and persuaded him to step into the breach, which is not a bad plan B. They fell out during production sadly and weren't reconciled until some years later. Morricone was one of the all-time greats but pretending to be Deep Purple wasn't one of his strengths, so the rock band aspect of the film is not convincing and, frankly, not germane to the story anyway.

There are good interviews with Michael Brandon, plus co-stars Mimsy Farmer and Bud Spencer. The brief interview with Argento himself is less impressive: the great man is well into his 80s and must have been interviewed countless times. Above all else, though, the film itself looks glorious in 4K. Argento fans will want to grab it, and movie lovers should get it because it's a fine film in its own right.

Daniel King

★★★★☆

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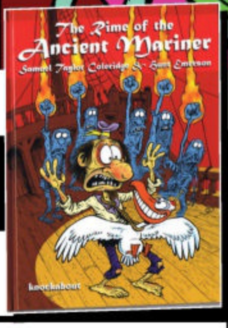
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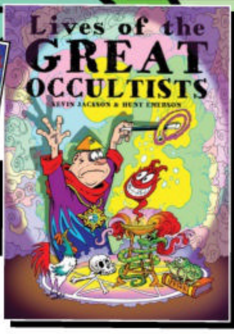
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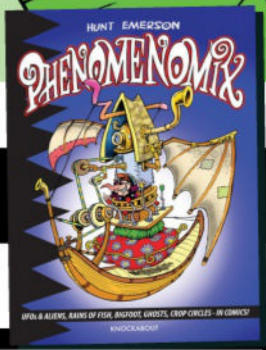
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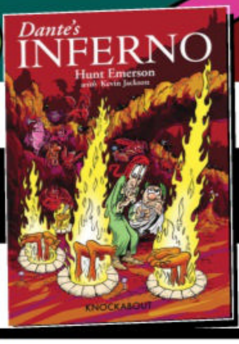
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Finding playing cards

I have been following one of the threads on recent FT letter pages with more than usual interest, namely the discussion around the collecting of found playing cards. My own interest in this was sparked by a brief paragraph in the 'Omnibus Believe it or Not!,' first UK edition published 1934, although I would have been reading this in the early to mid 1970s.

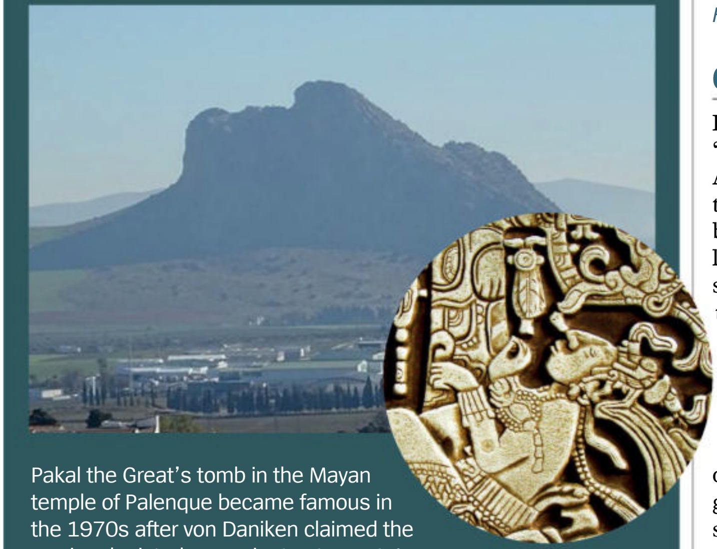
The paragraph in Ripley concerns a resident of Chicago called Frank Damek who, we are informed in breathless prose: '…compiled a complete pack of cards by picking them up from time to time in the street!' (p.188) It appears that Ripley himself picked up this story from a piece in *The Chicago Tribune* (15 February 1890), although there is subsequently a little doubt expressed as to the authenticity of the story (see https://www.weirduniverse.net/blog/comments/an_unusual_deck_of_cards/ for the article and a brief discussion).

In any case, the tale did lurk at the back of my mind, and eventually I had to start collecting those lost playing cards myself. I have a collection of about 30 years and I am nowhere near completion. One of the interesting aspects of this compulsion is that I have invented certain rules about how complete the card must be in order to be assimilated into the collection, how many cards can be picked up at one time and so on. I wonder if fellow collectors have also devised self-regulated guidelines?

Finally, I am painfully aware that no activity can aspire to proper serious investigation or participation without an appropriately pretentious name. Therefore I would like to tentatively suggest that the collection of found playing cards with the intention of creating a full deck maybe henceforth known as chartarumludentism. Greetings to all fellow chartarumludentists – why not get in touch and enjoy swapping some tales of the found and the 'one that got away'?

Anthony Wilkins
Rishworth, West Yorkshire

SIMULACRA CORNER



Pakal the Great's tomb in the Mayan temple of Palenque became famous in the 1970s after von Daniken claimed the carving depicted an ancient astronaut. Ian Jarvis recently spotted the same face sticking out of the Spanish landscape near the town of Antequera. "Positive proof of, er… something or other", he remarks.

We are always glad to receive pictures of spontaneous forms and figures, or any curious images. Send them (with your postal address) to **Fortean Times, PO Box 1200, Whitstable CT1 9RH** or to **sieveking@forteantimes.com**

David Lynch

As a huge David Lynch fan I was – like many – incredibly upset at his passing and enjoyed your obit [**FT455:26-27**]. However, it states that Lynch won three Oscars – for *The Elephant Man*, *Blue Velvet*, and *Mulholland Drive*. Sadly, he didn't actually win any of these, although he was nominated for each. He did however win an Academy Honorary Award in 2019.

Graham Mullins
Orpington, Kent

Hyde Park's bird man

I was intrigued by the article about the bird man of Hyde Park [**FT455:68-69**]. I was saddened to hear that Mr Bates v Marlborough Street magistrates ended so badly in 1928, but I'm not sure about a death soon afterwards, given that he was on the cover of *Life* dating from the end of 1936. I recently popped into my local library and fed the information supplied by Mr Bondeson into Ancestry and they came up with an entry on the 1939 register for a Richard H Bates living in St Pancras. Although it is possible it is someone with the same name, he was born on 6 March 1865 and earned a living as a missioner and publisher, which sounds like our man. If this is the last mention of him, perhaps he too was carried off in the conflagration that destroyed his life's work.

Like Mr Bondeson, I too have a book called *Ghosts of London* but mine is by Jack Hallam (Wolfe Publishing Ltd 1975). He too mentions Black Sally's tree, noting that Black Sally was a part-gypsy, female vagrant who ignored advice not to sleep under the haunted elm and was found dead in the morning (although some say that she was murdered by her husband). Since then, "a strange, sad moaning" has been heard in the area. Hallam dates this incident to "between the two world wars", so perhaps Mr Bates knew her both in flesh and in spirit.

Mike Haigh
Hebden Bridge, West Yorkshire

Commando raid?

Barry Baldwin's splendid article "The Evil That Men Do Lives On After Them" [**FT455:12-13**] mentions some theories about what brought about the mass emasculation of Athens' phallic herm statues, but he left out one of the most fortean theories of all: a vast conspiracy of Athenian women as an expression of rage against their menfolk for their sexist oppression carried out this commando raid one night on all those statues which were… going commando. This theory was spun out with flair, if not entirely with fact, by Eva Keuls in her very readable 1993 exploration *The Reign of the Phallus: Sexual Politics in Ancient Athens.*

Keith Jones
Rochester, New York

Folklore survey

I would like to suggest that those who value English folklore should think hard before cooperating with Hertfordshire University's National Folklore Survey [**FT453:4-5**] insofar as it seems to be an attempt to discredit and diminish English culture and identity. It proceeds from the claim that the English are 'confused' about their identity and 'embarrassed' about their traditions, apparently mistaking metropolitan attitudes for those of ordinary people, and it proposes to investigate how the celebration of English traditions is linked to nationalism and colonialism, hinting that the negative connotations of the latter will be used to stigmatise the former. The very fact that this research is being funded in an academic climate where the term 'Anglo-Saxon' is being erased from university history and linguistic courses gives me the feeling that it will not be framed in a way that is sympathetic towards its subjects.

Marc Widdowson
Hanthorpe, Lincolnshire

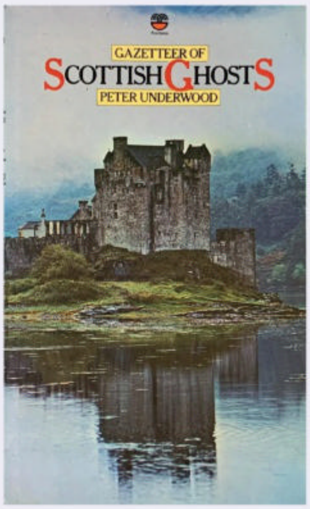
Phantom horses

In a recent letter (**FT455:61**), Tom Bryan refers to a claim by a man called Sandy Gunn that, in January 1900, he saw a mermaid. Bryan gives his source for this story as a book by the late Ronald Macdonald Robertson.[1] According to this version, the mermaid was perched on a rock off Rubh' an Fhir Lèithe on the Atlantic coast of Sutherland, which is the most north-westerly county of mainland Scotland. However, judging from pp.335-336 of his book *Where the Ghosts Walk*, the late Peter Underwood assumed that Gunn had described his mermaid sighting to Macdonald Robertson as having happened at Sandwood Bay, which is about two and a half miles north-east of Rubh' an Fhir Lèithe.[2] Perhaps Underwood simply got the story wrong. At any rate, Bryan states that all who knew Gunn "vouched for his honesty and integrity".

Sandy Gunn worked as a shepherd. According to p.53 of another book by Macdonald Robertson,[3] he was very intelligent, possessed second sight, and had an amazing gift of story-telling. He may also have been malodorous, because he boasted that he'd never had a bath! He may well have been honest in his day-to-day dealings with people, but it's possible that he invented or embellished supernatural tales to entertain himself and/or his listeners. Maybe he didn't expect the stories to be taken as serious historical accounts. Or perhaps there was an element of unintentional confabulation in his story-telling, with fantasy becoming mistaken for historical fact. The following improbable yarn features Sandy Gunn and can be found on pp.71-72 of Macdonald Robertson's *Selected Highland Folktales*.

PETER A MCCUE

He was awakened by sounds of all the windows and doors being smashed in



The story tells of a time (no dates given) when Gunn supposedly worked for a period in Glen Urquhart, Inverness-shire. His employer there, the local laird, asked him where he wanted to stay. Gunn pointed at a house and asked whether there would be room there. The laird said no. Asked why, the laird explained that the house was haunted. Gunn scoffed at that idea, and a room was prepared for him in the house. He slept well the first night. The next morning, the laird commended Gunn for his bravery and gave him a whisky. The second night, he slept even better and received another whisky in the morning. But the third night, about midnight, he was awakened by sounds suggestive of all the windows and doors being smashed in. The whole house vibrated, as if a violent storm were raging; and from above, there was a noise like that of a horse in the attic, "trampling and wallowing". Gunn grabbed his Bible for protection and pulled the bedclothes over his head. The storm seemed to last for five or six minutes.

Gunn claimed that he braved the situation in the house for six weeks, during which time the noises recurred every third night. And this is arguably the most implausible aspect of the story, since ghostly phenomena seldom, if ever, behave with such regularity.

A mutated version of the tale can be found on pp.173-4 of the late Peter Underwood's book *Gazetteer of Scottish Ghosts.*[4] The site of the action has been transposed to Sandwood Cottage (now a ruin), near Sandwood Bay in Sutherland (pictured above). And instead of one witness, Sandy Gunn, there are two: a couple of unnamed walkers from Surrey! Feeling tired, they'd supposedly decided to spend a night at the cottage before resuming their journey. As in the story about the house in Glen Urquhart, disturbing sounds were allegedly heard, including noises suggestive of a horse stamping and pawing. The walkers are said to have fled at dawn. The story is also mentioned in at least two other books by Underwood: *Where the Ghosts Walk* (p.339) and *Nights in Haunted Hauses*.[5] Unlike *Gazetteer of Scottish Ghosts*, they give a date for the alleged incident: September 1970.

NOTES

1 Ronald Macdonald Robertson, *Wade the River, Drift the Loch*, Oliver & Boyd, 1948, pp. 105-7.

2 Peter Underwood, *Where the Ghosts Walk*. Souvenir Press, 2013.

3 Ronald Macdonald Robertson, *Selected Highland Folktales*, House of Lochar, 1995.

4 Peter Underwood, *Gazetteer of Scottish Ghosts*. Fontana/Collins, 1980.

5 Peter Underwood, *Nights in Haunted Houses*. Privately published, 1994, pp. 213-4.

Peter A McCue
By email

Airship sightings

The following coincidences happened to me over the course of the last few days [in March 2025].

I had been reading Paul Devereux's brilliant book, *Fairy Roads and Spirit Paths* while travelling by train down to a job, and had read the author's brief account of a childhood experience in which he and a friend witnessed a 'phantom airship' type phenomenon. To my surprise, when chatting with one of my colleagues on the site in the pub that evening, they related an event that they had experienced with their brother in childhood, which also involved a disappearing 'phantom airship'. This was not prompted in any way by myself, and I thought it striking that both accounts were similar in featuring two young witnesses of the same age and also specific in describing their airborne objects as zeppelin-type archaic craft which disappeared, as opposed to futurist metallic saucers or any other more commonly perceived 20th century UFOs. While phantom airship phenomena are a memorable feature of Fort's writing, I had wrongly assumed that the reporting of such craft was confined to this earlier era.

The second coincidence relates to a letter [**FT447:64**], in which I had referred sentimentally to the first issue of *Fortean Times* I'd ever read and the inspired family visit to the Cheddar Gorge attraction known as 'The Crystal Quest' to get a photo of the bogus Arabian djinn which had featured in that issue. Last week, in a local charity bookshop, I was looking through a pile of magazines from the 1990s called *UFO Magazine*, and found one lone copy of *FT* from that era amongst them. This happened to be issue 82, the very one I had first read back in 1995. I bought it to enjoy again, my original copy having disappeared years ago.

Rob Amos
Worcester

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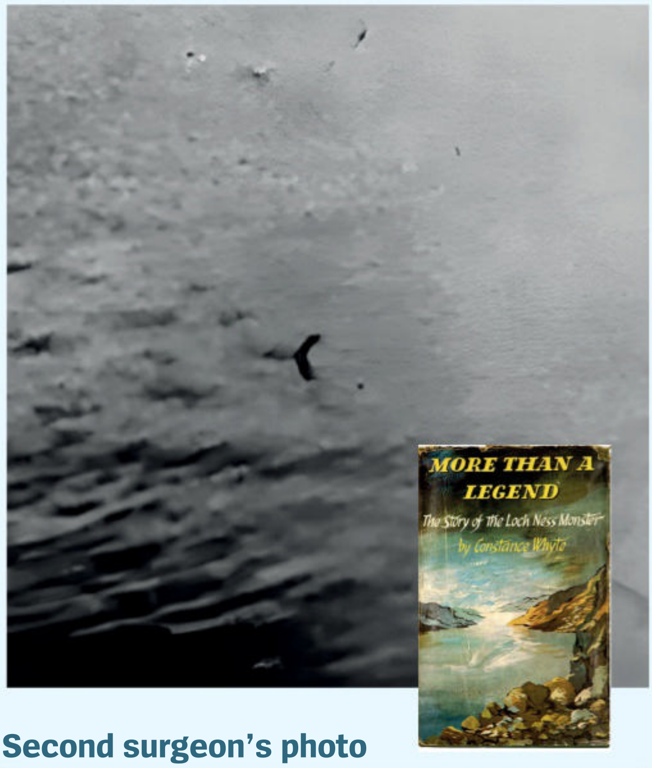


Second surgeon's photo

I'm not suggesting for a moment that the Surgeon's photograph was anything other than a hoax, but there was a second photograph attributed to the surgeon – Robert Kenneth Wilson – which I have been told first appeared in Constance Whyte's book *More Than A Legend* (Hamish Hamilton, 1957). This appears to show the monster-model positioned diagonally, leaving a wake behind it, implying that it is just about to dive under the water.

This suggests that either: 1) the head and neck on Christian Spurling's model was flexible and could be moved to a different position, or 2) That there was a second model made by Christian Spurling which, as far as I know, no-one has ever mentioned.

Can readers throw any light on this mystery?

Andy Owens, *Halifax, West Yorkshire*

Chris Ransted *by email*

Comments on FT456

In the article 'In Search of the Paradise Valley' (**FT456:38-41**), Ted Harrison mentions the "preposterous story" of Jesus travelling to the Himalayas, and the fact that Nicholas Notovich saw texts in a Ladakh monastery regarding a man called Issa. Not being a linguist, I can't comment on how similar these names might be, especially when you consider that 'Jesus' is itself a translation from Hebrew, but from several online sources I see that the Hebrew original was a common name, so even if such a person did visit the Himalayas, there's no reason for anyone to believe it was Jesus Christ. I'm reminded of the *Red Dwarf* episode, where they travel back to Biblical times. They hear a man being addressed as Jesus, and approach him with great reverence, but it turns out he's just an ordinary bloke.

- Regarding 'The Only Key' [Letters, **FT456:57**], there is one obvious question: what did the photo show?

- Both letters and book reviews mention certain visual anomalies. Regarding migraines, I experienced these several times in my childhood. Symptoms included the "corona of sparkling lights" mentioned by David Taylor, intense headache and nausea. In later years the attacks have come back, but now I only get the sparkling corona (no, I don't mean the drink), which just makes it a bit annoying when I'm reading FT or watching TV. Incidentally, I don't get headaches when I'm hung over, either, just a feeling of vagueness, which is nice.

When considering visual anomalies, it is worth bearing in mind that the brain does a lot of processing, to give you the image you 'see'. For one thing, the image projected onto the back of the eye is upside down, and our brains kindly invert it for us. In addition, we have a blind spot, and our brains make an educated guess as to the missing data. We also have our imaginations, and sometimes we see what we expect to see, rather than what's there. Admittedly, my knowledge of these processes is shallow, but I think it strongly suggests that our brains are largely responsible for most of the anomalies we may see.

Dave Miles
By email

Migraines

I am fortunate not to suffer from migraines, but the FT letters on the subject [**FT456:58**] put me in mind of my favourite film, Powell and Pressburger's extraordinary *A Matter of Life and Death* (1946).

In this film, a bomber pilot, played by David Niven, jumps to certain death from a burning plane. He miraculously survives, but is pursued by the representatives of a bureaucratic afterlife who insist he is meant to be dead. The hero's visions of the supernatural are accompanied by migraines and a strong smell of fried onions. It would be interesting to know if smell plays any part in timeslip experiences.

In one scene, the protagonist experiences a painful migraine and cannot see the heroine. To him, she has disappeared. I now realise that she was actually standing in his "migraine blind spot", as described in David Taylor's letter.

The film suggests that the hero's visions of the afterlife are due to a bleed on the brain. However, it also leaves room for the possibility of his injury allowing him insight into other realms of existence. Either way, it's clear that Powell and Pressburger really did their homework on brain injury, migraines, hallucinations and mystical experiences.

Lewis JW Hurst
London

It Happened to Me...

Readers write in with their own accounts of strange phenomena

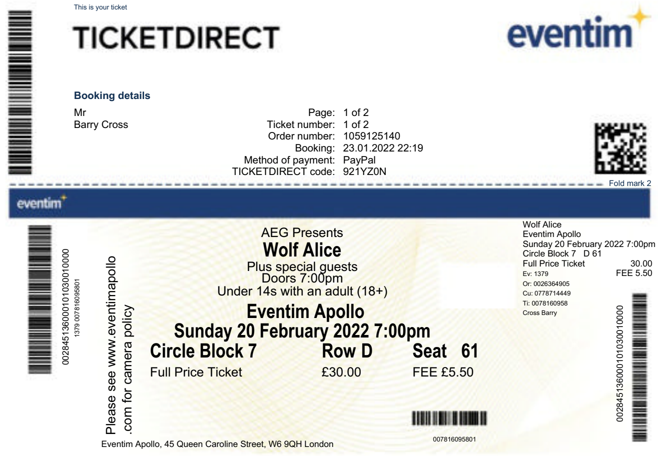
Ticket story

As someone that loves live music, the Covid pandemic proved a right pain. Throughout 2020 and early 2021, concert venues closed their doors as government lockdowns made it impossible for bands to tour. However, by the fourth quarter of 2021, life began to slowly return to normal and some venues reopened.

Being now in my 60s, although I personally have no problem mixing with lots of younger people at rock concerts, it's almost impossible to find anyone of my own age to accompany me to gigs. Fortunately, my youngest daughter, Louise, shares a similar taste in music, so can occasionally be persuaded to come out with me. In late 2021, I also started going to gigs with my wife's cousin, Sarah, who being in her 50s finds it similarly difficult to find people of a similar age to go with her, but fortunately likes the same music as I do too.

Sarah, in particular, is a big fan of Wolf Alice and had bought tickets to see the band at Hammersmith Apollo, where they were due to play three consecutive sold-out concerts in January 2022. She'd booked the tickets before we started gigging together and had arranged to go to the Apollo with one of her sisters. However, Covid restrictions subsequently forced the band to reschedule the three dates, which were pushed back to 18-20 February. I'd missed out on tickets the first time around, but since my birthday falls on 20 February, I idly checked various websites to see whether any of the original tickets would be back on sale from fans who couldn't make the new dates. At first I had no luck; it looked as though the three nights were still sold out. But when I checked the Apollo's own site, I was extremely fortunate to buy two tickets for the 20th, with Louise more than happy to come along.

Miraculously, Sarah's two tickets had also been rescheduled for the same date as ours, and although we knew all four of us would be somewhere in the Circle, we weren't sure exactly where. The weather that entire week was foul, and it was pouring with rain when Louise and I arrived at the Apollo, with the support band already playing. Louise used the torch on her mobile phone to locate our seats, which were in the middle of a row. As we groped our way towards them, Louise cried out in stunned amazement. There were her two cousins, who had seats adjacent to our own!



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Mr
Barry Cross

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As we groped our way towards our seats, Louise cried out in amazement

What were the odds on that happening? The only available tickets had been for the Sunday and the only seats left were those next to Sarah and her sister. The Apollo can accommodate around 5,000 people. Clearly, somebody somewhere wanted us all to sit together. And Sarah and I have been attending gigs together ever since.

Barry Cross
Ashford, Kent

Telepathic machine?

Recently we had some carpets cleaned professionally and the man asked if we could pay him in cash. This was no problem as we always keep spare cash aside for such eventualities. The cost was £60.

Shortly after, I had reason to visit the local post office, inside a convenience store that has an ATM. My wife asked me to get £60 to replace the money we had given to the cleaner. I then said, rather flippantly, "Oh, I'll get £120". My wife said, "Just get the £60."

I went to the machine – just under a 10-minute walk – put in my card and entered the pin number. When the screen asked what service was required I pressed 'Withdraw cash' – but the screen that lists the various cash denominations did not appear. (I don't recall this happening before with any ATM.) So there was no opportunity to enter an amount. Instead, the closing screens immediately came into view, the ones which said 'Please take your card', then 'Please take your cash.' The card appeared and I was amazed to see a number of notes being issued. I counted the money – exactly £120!

The following day I visited another ATM to check if the £120 had been debited. It had.

Have I been the victim of The Trickster?

Raymond Cox
Halesowen, West Midlands

Wardrobe reflection

When I was very young I was very close to my grandparents on my mum's side, usually going down to see them at least three times a week. However, I was always closer to my nan than my grandad; we just generally seemed to get on and understand each other much better. When I was 10 my nan died. This obviously left my grandad on his own. Although I tried to get closer to him at this time, it was all to no avail and gradually over the next three years we became strangers. I never saw him and no contact was made between us. I did feel bad about how I seemed to neglect him, but not bad enough it seems to have done anything about it. When I was 18, my grandad passed away.

On the day of his funeral the family congregated at his bungalow for the wake after his cremation. When people started to leave I went into my grandad's bedroom, to a wardrobe in there, to bring out people's coats so they could leave. I opened the wardrobe to gather the coats. On the back of the wardrobe door was a full-length mirror and I saw my reflection as the door swung back. It was me, but it was my grandad's face looking back at me, as if his face had been superimposed onto mine. There was no expression, but a stony blank stare that seemed full of contempt. It scared me to death, but it was only there for maybe three or four seconds before the reflection of my own face returned on the mirror.

I still think about it quite regularly although I'm now in my 70s. I believe it may have been my guilty conscience that made me see his face, as I did feel bad at becoming estranged from him when he lost his wife. The look on his face still haunts me, it wasn't so much anger but disappointment and sheer contempt that seemed to radiate from it. If only I could turn the clock back!

John Finch
Aylestone, Leicester

Past life flash

As a boy I had what I believe was a flash into a memory of a past life. I guess I was around 12 or 13 (which would have made it 1986/87). I'd just bought some batteries for a hand-held game and I approached a road with traffic lights. I was aware that I faced a red light and was reading the battery pack to pass the time, but as I did so I placed a foot on the road, knowing that I wasn't going to cross, because I could hear cars coming – but the driver approaching obviously thought I was going to continue walking while reading (it was very foolish on my part) and slammed on her brakes, locked up her wheels squealing the tires and sounded her horn.

This assault on the senses had an impact. I ran into the road but as I ran I was no longer on a road in Bristol but in a savannah; I was running for my life from something chasing me, something large and grey (the car in question was a grey Morris Minor). In this vision my arms, legs and body were that of a black man (I'm white in this life) and I ran and ran and I felt something strike my legs and went down to the ground. In this vision I was resigned to my fate as I fell, but as soon as I hit the pavement I came around and was back in 'reality'. The vision was all-encompassing – and despite having used all manner of hallucinogenic drugs since (at that age I hadn't even smoked a cigarette) – I have never had such a strong hallucination. Perhaps it was my body's way of dealing with the stress of the threat and danger, but I have no explanation why that particular vision would have been created. (Although an interesting side note is that it happened right next to the BBC Natural History department). I have no other explanation other than it was a memory from a past life.

Matt Elliott
By email

Strange day in Blackburn

I have worked in a former Victorian foundry building in Blackburn for 19 years, with the responsibility for opening and closing the works during this time – and have been on the site early in the morning and late in the evening, often being the first to arrive or last to leave.

One morning in November 2021, I arrived early to open up. I let myself in to the shopfloor and proceeded to walk to the offices. Being early it was dark; and as I opened the office door, I thought I heard someone behind me speak my first name which made me jump, but when I turned around there was no one there, so I put it down to having been mistaken, even though I was sure I hadn't been mistaken. The day proceeded without incident until around 4pm when I had to walk out to the postbox across the street with the day's post. It was starting to get dark by this time and as I returned to work, I happened to look toward our works and my attention was drawn to the windows of our "out of bounds" upstairs offices (for which I keep the only keys), because all the lights were on. Annoyed, I dashed back inside, asking one of my colleagues who was upstairs as I hurried to check my key box, only for my colleague to reply "no one" and for me to find the keys where they should be. I headed upstairs to find all the lights off, no one upstairs and everything secure.

STEVEN BENNETT / ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

Now although I thought it very strange, I might accept that you could explain away either of the two incidents as mistakes on my part and even the coincidence of both happening on the same day, however it's the next bit that I just cannot get my head around. At the end of the working day, around 6pm, my work colleagues left and then I proceeded to lock up and leave. I headed down the street and spoke with one of my colleagues, who was waiting on the street for a taxi, and then carried on to my car, which was parked a short walk further on, in our parking area just off the main street. As I approached my car, I became aware of a young man walking hurriedly up the street.

Obviously in 19 years I have seen many people on the street and even nodded or said good morning to people, but in all of that time, before or since, apart from this one day, I have never stopped for a conversation with a random passer-by, but as this man got closer to me, he suddenly deviated off the pavement to intercept me at the front of my car. As he approached he blurted out: "Do you know there is a lot of paranormal activity on this street today?" Now you can imagine, this took me aback, but I must add for the record, that "although I found this sudden outburst unnerving, the man himself didn't feel threatening; he didn't look unusual, but I found it decidedly odd that he made a beeline for me and say this to a random stranger and on this particular day, when I'd experienced my own odd incidents. That said, even though I couldn't quite believe what was happening, I did engage with him for a couple of minutes whilst he proceeded to tell me about some odd people he'd seen and especially a ghostly monk he had seen in the street whom he didn't like the look of. (I have since looked into this and can find no record of a ghostly monk in our town.) So I then decided to tell him about my day, which he seemed interested in, but then he quickly broke off the conversation and walked off in the direction he had been heading before he came to me. I watched him go for a few seconds, turned around, nodded to my taxi-waiting work colleague who was watching me from up the road, got in my car and drove home feeling more than perplexed about the day's events. I did consider in the days after that it might be a forerunner to some kind of important event about to happen in my life, but I cannot pinpoint anything that did and I have never seen this guy since.

> "There is a lot of paranormal activity on this street today"

The next day I went in to work and my taxi-waiting colleague approached me and asked what had been going on the previous evening, so I excitedly told him the day's story, culminating with the man whom I spoke to in the street. Without missing a beat, he said, "Well that's the thing, as you seemed to be talking to yourself."

Incidentally, the taxi-waiting colleague still works with me and just last week [20-24 Jan 2025] I asked him if he remembered my tale, and to my surprise he remembered it very well.

Darren T
Blackburn, Lancashire

Mystery light

Although I've had anomalous sightings over the years, the strangest one happened around 1980 in northwestern Illinois. My then-boyfriend and I were driving home after visiting the local county fair, and we decided to pull over on a gravel road to engage in a little romance. Full-grown corn (American maize) was on either side of the road, and the nearest intersections were nearly a mile in front of and behind us. I knew the area well; I'd grown up there and a friend's father owned the fields. Their house and barns were more than a mile away, and there were no buildings or light poles anywhere near this field. The corn was full-grown but not yet ripe, so no harvesting was underway. It was a very clear night, and there was no traffic on the road we parked on.

Suddenly, the car was filled with the most brilliant light coming from just over the top of the corn next to the car, about three or four metres from the ground. It was like a ball of light with the centre so intense it looked blue-white, and it appeared to aim directly at the car. There was absolutely no sound; if this had been a harvester or tractor (the only vehicles likely to be in a field), we should have heard something, but it was dead still. We immediately sped away, but by the time we reached the next intersection, we decided we had to go back to take another look. We saw nothing – no light and no sign that anyone had been in the field.

At the time, we never told anyone about this experience; we didn't think anyone would believe us. But nearly two decades later, I told the story at a family gathering, and when I finished, my father said that he wasn't surprised, since people saw anomalous lights there all the time. Apparently they didn't talk about it much, since this was the first I ever heard that someone else had a similar experience; my dad, however, was the kind of person that people talked to about all kinds of things. I've since moved away, but I continue to wonder if the phenomenon still occurs.

TH (full name on file)
Evansville, Indiana

LETTERS

Imaginary air raid

Reviewing *Spielberg – A Retrospective,* Nigel Watson [**FT455:54-55**] states that Spielberg's flop, *1941,* "is loosely based on the panic caused by the fear of Japanese air attacks in 1942, that produced the Zoot Suit riots" (Eh!? Did it ? I really think that that was more a class/race issue, and I am fairly certain that most social historians would agree with me!) "and the so-called 'Battle of Los Angeles' where anti-aircraft guns fired at... what transpired to be an imaginary air raid."

Well , the 'jury' is still most firmly 'out' on that! Quite a lot of more recent research (including in these hallowed pages!) has turned up the volume, as it were, towards the idea – re *that* particular photograph, that searchlights *were* actually focused on, at least, a "something"; and the archived negative of that photo came from a completely different lab than *all* the many tens of thousands of other *LA Times* archived negatives.

A bit odd, at the very least.

Mark Pearson
By email

No photo

Jo Blake raises an excellent point [**FT456:62**]. More broadly, where is the flood of visual evidence of strange phenomena we expected to see as cameras became ubiquitous?

I wonder. However, as a counterpoint I offer my own experience of seeing a flock of some 10-20 strange birds land in a sycamore opposite the first floor flat I occupied in Sheffield seven or eight years ago. The birds were about the size of pigeons, but shaped more like large thrushes. They were pale brown in colour. They remained for a few minutes, so I had a good look and ran through the various possibilities in my head. I'd be interested to hear if anyone more expert than me can identify them. Where is my photo, you may ask? The tree was on the opposite side of a wide intersection, and I was sure they wouldn't photograph well. However, with hindsight I do wish I'd tried.

Genevieve Gorrell
Preston, Lancashire

Interesting times

Regarding the curse "May you live in interesting times" [**FT455:25**]: an old issue of FT said it was invented by the English writer Ernest Bramah for his novel *The Wallet of Kai Lung*, which came out in 1900. However, the wiki-page on the course (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/May_you_live_in_interesting_times) knows nothing about Bramah and claims it was first used around 1936 – and that it is definitely not Chinese.

- As FT looks back so often to old British TV shows hardly known outside UK, I am still waiting for a piece on the *Avengers* with the heroes John Steed and Emma Peel (and other sidekicks before and after). Many of the episodes were fortean-themed. I recall the robot clones that both Cathy Gale and Emma Peel had to fight, the energy-eating cyborg pet that lived in a tunnel below a church, the airfield where Steed and Peel experienced a one-hour time loss (which was explained by a conspiracy) and the haunted churchyard that led to an underground city where the Soviets were training for a takeover of Britain. Time travel, mind control, even a machine for mind exchange… You name it, they had it. One episode even featured a UFO cult. And the whole atmosphere, even in the later episodes without Emma Peel, was pretty surreal and weird.

Ulrich Magin *Hennef, Germany*

Fortean ethics

There *are* items of fortean interest in the immediate area of Waverley Abbey [**FT451:44-49**]. These are not of the cryptozoological variety but folkloric – namely Mother Ludlam's 'Cave' and Father Foote's 'Cave' above it. Both less than a kilometre (0.62 miles) from the Abbey off the good footpath to Farnham. See Wikipedia for a full account of the artificially excavated 'caves'.

Investigating the Abbey area, shortly after my December 2024 issue of FT arrived, I found residents, workers on the Waverley Abbey House estate and regular local dog walkers reported no wild animals "larger than a squirrel" among the ruins. In short, there was no local tradition of a dragon or other known reports of a dragon in the Waverley Abbey area. In a twilight search of the partly-natural riverine woodland to the west of the ruins, I did manage to inadvertently flush out a dark-pigmented roe deer. I didn't personally see any herons. There's no place in the ruins or nearby them for even a small dragon to hide and no piles of reptilian excrement. During the night time of a long day return I did see a bat with 20cm/8in wingspan, slightly bigger than a pipistrelle. However, there *was* a very big red kite (*Milvus milvus*) which had a wingspan of about 1.6m (over 5ft) circling the Abbey ruins persistently, past dusk and well into the dark winter evening at a height of between 3m and 15m [9.8–49ft]. The trajectories of the red kite's twilight patrols over the ruins were long and curving, very, very similar indeed to the one or two routes reported by the south coast ghosts group Ouija boardists.

My current view, if the report is actually sincere, is that it was the red kite I saw or one of its close relatives that formed the nucleus of the ghosthunter's notionally supernatural experience.

For me, this reported event raises two sets of serious, related, ethical questions for forteans – especially those of our cohorts charged (by their erudition and experience) with editing and administering our favourite weird phenomena magazine!

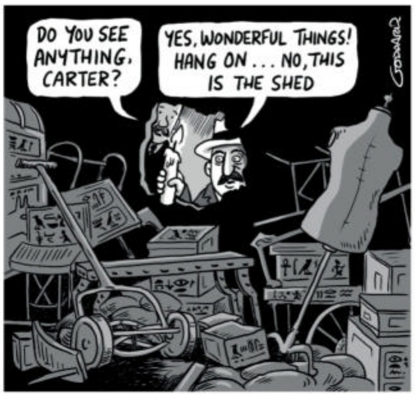
1. Are we encouraging hoaxing attention-seekers or opportunist profiteering by employing a too-relaxed and uncritical approach to some witness testimonies and the commissioning of related reports? Are you, on occasion, just issuing subject matter for a future anthropology of deceit, as happened with crop circles?

2. More worryingly, could we be making people with individual or collective mental illnesses clinically worse by publicly reporting the content of their symptoms? Might not apparent public validation of possibly disturbed witnesses' false beliefs make their delusions worse and possibly make them dangerous to themselves and others? In the hunt for interesting and amusing content for your fascinating magazine, where and how do you draw the line?

My personal view is that whereas Ouija boards and associated paraphernalia and related ideologies may not be the gateway to demonic possession that credulous New Agers and fanatical media religionists crack them up to be, prolonged attempted usage may adversely affect one's critical faculties, reality-testing skills and powers of observational ornithology.

Finally, I would ask those who, like the article's author, Richard Freeman, apparently believe in such items: "What is the difference between a psychically generated 'tulpa' uncorroborated with physical evidence and an hallucination?".

Alan Lewis BSc BA MSc FCybS
London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WHY FORTEAN?

FORTEAN TIMES is a monthly magazine of news, reviews and research on strange phenomena and experiences, curiosities, prodigies and portents. It was founded by Bob Rickard in 1973 to continue the work of Charles Fort (1874–1932).

Born of Dutch stock in Albany, New York, Fort spent many years researching scientific literature in the New York Public Library and the British Museum Library. He marshalled his evidence and set forth his philosophy in *The Book of the Damned* (1919), *New Lands* (1923), *Lo!* (1931), and *Wild Talents* (1932).

He was sceptical of dogmatic scientific explanations, observing that some scientists tended to argue according to their personal beliefs rather than the rules of evidence and that inconvenient data were ignored, suppressed, discredited or explained away. He criticised modern science for its reductionism, its attempts to define, divide and separate. Fort's dictum "One measures a circle beginning anywhere" expresses instead his philosophy of Continuity in which everything is in an intermediate and transient state between extremes.

He had ideas of the Universe-as-organism and the transient nature of all apparent phenomena, coined the term 'teleportation', and was perhaps the first to speculate that mysterious lights seen in the sky might be craft from outer space. However, he cut at the very roots of credulity: "I conceive of nothing, in religion, science or philosophy, that is more than the proper thing to wear, for a while."

Fort was by no means the first person to collect anomalies and oddities – such collections have abounded from Greece to China since ancient times. **Fortean Times** keeps alive this ancient task of dispassionate weird-watching, exploring the wild frontiers between the known and the unknown.

Besides being a journal of record, **FT** is also a forum for the discussion of observations and ideas, however absurd or unpopular, and maintains a position of benevolent scepticism towards both the orthodox and unorthodox. **FT** toes no party line.

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PECULIAR POSTCARDS

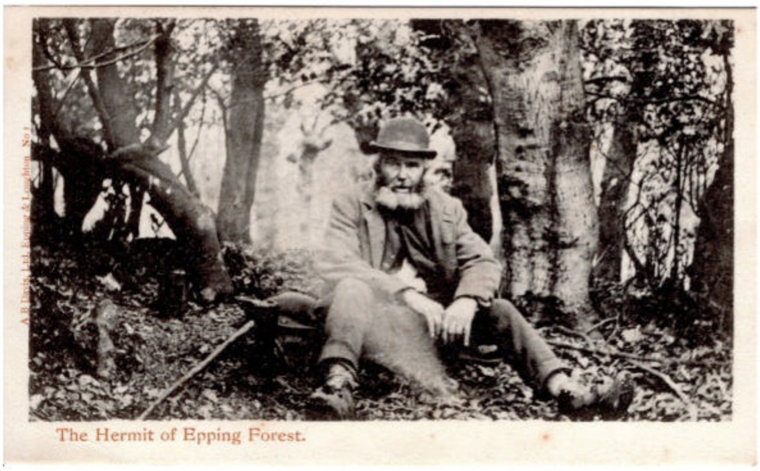
JAN BONDESON shares another deltiological discovery from his prodigious collection of postcards. This month's pictorial blast from the past celebrates William Burke and his brief career as a modern wild man of the woods

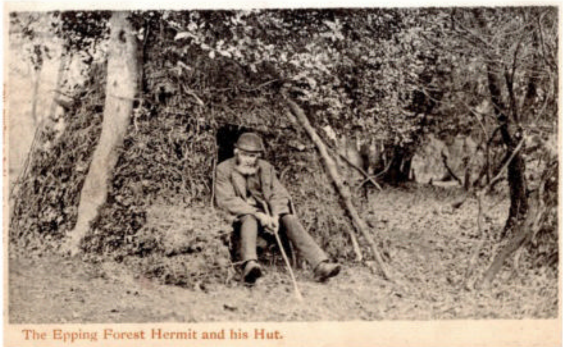
53. THE HERMIT OF EPPING FOREST

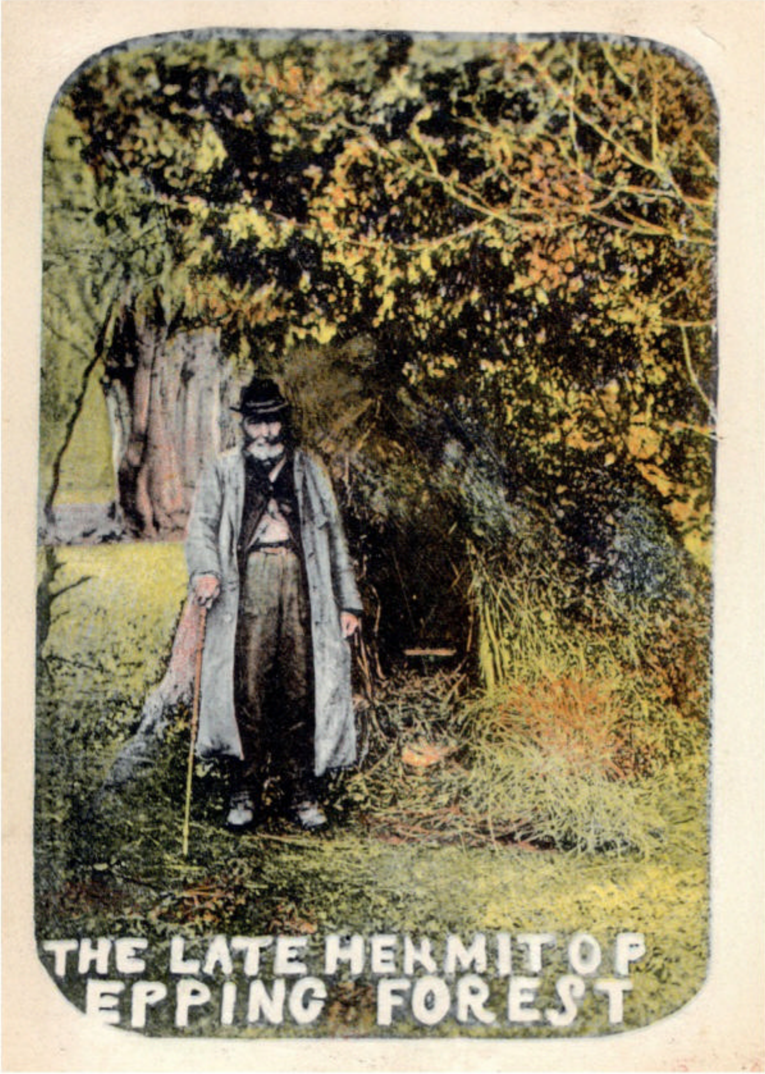
In 1900, an elderly, bushy-bearded man took up residence in a primitive hut in Epping Forest on the borders of London and Essex. He called himself William Burke, and spent his time harmlessly waddling about in the forest or sitting inside his hut. Although a far from attractive specimen of humanity, he proclaimed himself a vegetarian and a teetotaller, and did not beg or steal; the forest-keepers, whose duty it was to evict vagabonds, tolerated his presence. Sometimes, visitors to the forest sought Burke's opinion on botanical and arboreal matters, and rewarded the hermit with a small present if he had anything useful to contribute.

For three years, William Burke lived in the hut he had built in Epping Forest, under the shade of a great holly-tree in a forest glade off the Loughton road. He was thought curious enough to be immortalised in an early picture postcard: 'The Epping Forest Hermit and his hut'. He hit the newspaper headlines in March 1903, when there were rumours that, after falling ill, he was leaving his hut to end his days in the warmth and security of a house. But a *Chelmsford Chronicle* journalist found the Epping Forest Hermit still in resident in his hut, cantankerously denying any plans to leave his arboreal abode.

In June 1903, the Epping Forest Hermit again made the news, after Forest-keeper Hughes had found him lying in his hut, unable to move. The hut was partially demolished so that the limp body of the hermit could be removed and taken out to a nearby cab; this vehicle took him to the Epping Infirmary, where he was diagnosed with acute bronchitis. Pneumonia set in, however, and a few days later the enfeebled old man died; he was buried at Epping Church on 13 June 1903. His death certificate gives his name as William Burke and his age as 72. A man of mystery in a forest of sanctity, he made a habit of never confiding in any person: nothing was known about his previous life, and the reason for him taking to the woods remains obscure to this day. A nice coloured postcard was printed after his death, depicting 'The Late Hermit of Epping Forest' standing in front of his hut.


The Hermit of Epping Forest.


The Epping Forest Hermit and his Hut.

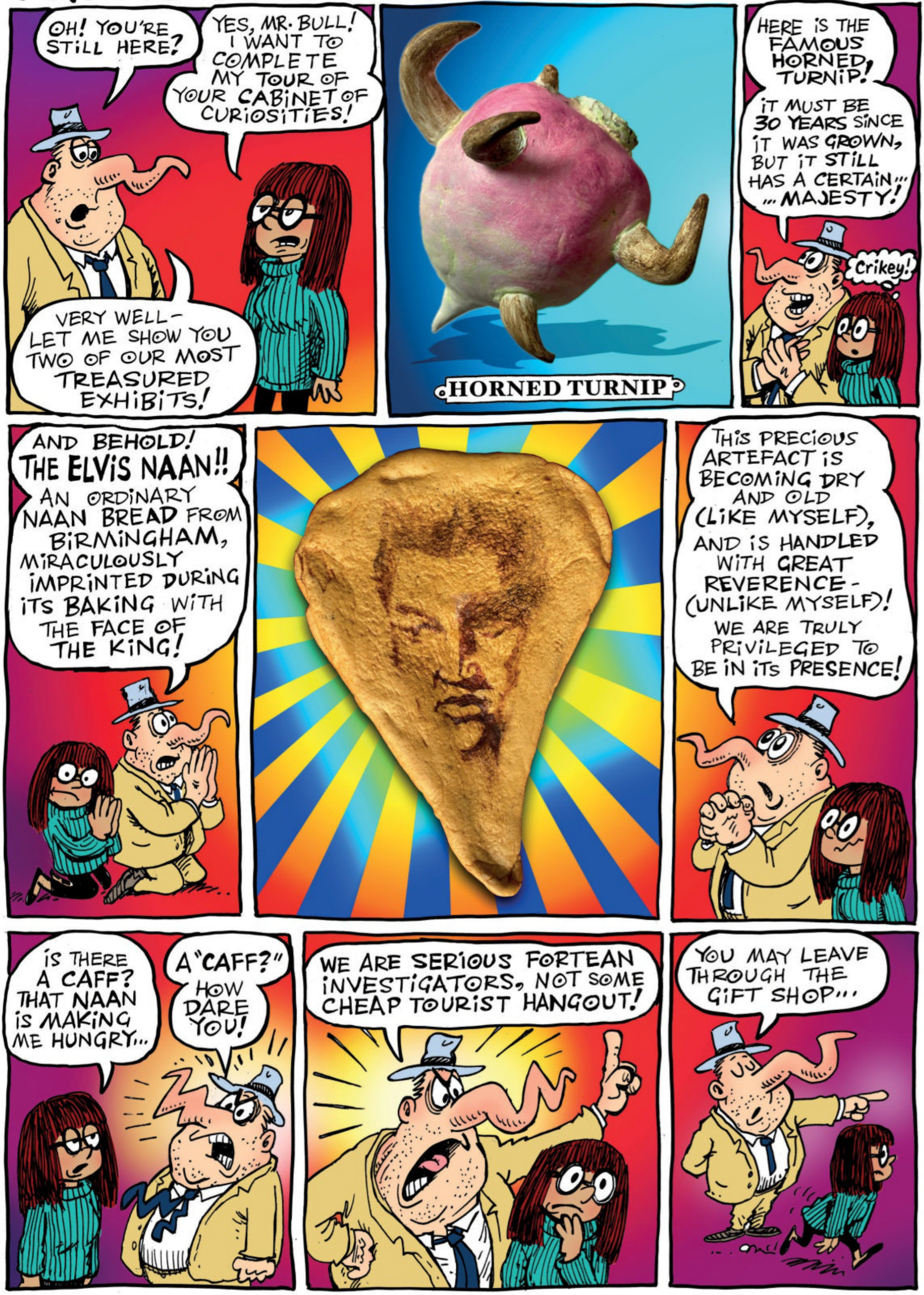

THE LATE HERMIT OF EPPING FOREST

ABOVE: The Hermit of Epping Forest in front of his primitive hut. **TOP RIGHT**: The Hermit sitting in the woods. **RIGHT**: The Hermit and his hermitage in a colour postcard printed after his death.

PHENOMENOMIX

Cabinet of Curiosities 5

HUNT EMERSON


OH! YOU'RE STILL HERE?
YES, MR. BULL! I WANT TO COMPLETE MY TOUR OF YOUR CABINET OF CURIOSITIES!
VERY WELL- LET ME SHOW YOU TWO OF OUR MOST TREASURED EXHIBITS!
HORNED TURNIP
HERE IS THE FAMOUS HORNED TURNIP!
IT MUST BE 30 YEARS SINCE IT WAS GROWN, BUT IT STILL HAS A CERTAIN... ...MAJESTY!
Crikey!
AND BEHOLD! THE ELVIS NAAN!! AN ORDINARY NAAN BREAD FROM BIRMINGHAM, MIRACULOUSLY IMPRINTED DURING ITS BAKING WITH THE FACE OF THE KING!
THIS PRECIOUS ARTEFACT IS BECOMING DRY AND OLD (LIKE MYSELF), AND IS HANDLED WITH GREAT REVERENCE- (UNLIKE MYSELF)! WE ARE TRULY PRIVILEGED TO BE IN ITS PRESENCE!
IS THERE A CAFF? THAT NAAN IS MAKING ME HUNGRY...
A "CAFF?" HOW DARE YOU!
WE ARE SERIOUS FORTEAN INVESTIGATORS, NOT SOME CHEAP TOURIST HANGOUT!
YOU MAY LEAVE THROUGH THE GIFT SHOP...

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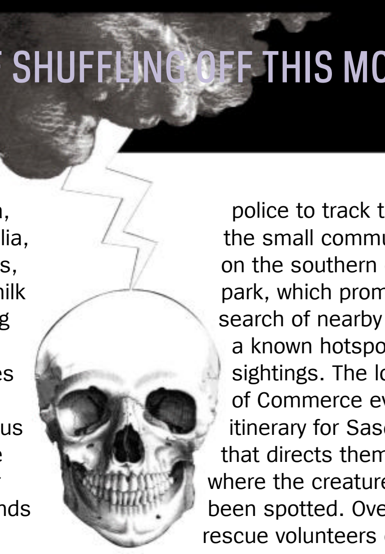
ON SALE 12 JUNE 2025

STRANGE DEATHS

UNUSUAL WAYS OF SHUFFLING OFF THIS MORTAL COIL



A farm worker in Laje da Jiboia, near the Brazilian capital Brasilia, got up at 5am to milk the cows, but after taking some of the milk to his employer for his morning coffee, he failed to return home. Investigating, colleagues found the 45-year-old man in the cow shed, lying unconscious beside one of the cows. There was an open condom wrapper beside him, and when his friends turned him over they found he was wearing the condom. Emergency services were called, and tried to revive the unconscious man, but he went into cardiac arrest and died before he could be taken to hospital. Police said that they were working on the theory that the man had received a fatal kick to the head from the cow as he tried to have sex with it. *mirror.co.uk, 11 Jan 2025*.

A large part of the French rail network ground to a halt on Christmas Eve 2024 when an automatic emergency system stopped a high speed TGV train travelling from Paris to St Etienne with 400 passengers on board near Melun, 25 miles (40km) south of the capital. The system requires constant pressure on a pedal from the driver, and if this is not detected, an alarm sounds after 50 yards (46m); then, if there is no response, the emergency brake is applied after a further 50 yards. Train staff assumed that the driver, Bruno Rejony, 52, who was locked in the cabin alone, had become incapacitated, but after taking 15 minutes to force the door, the ticket inspector found that Rejony was nowhere to be found. This triggered a search of the route by emergency services and after two hours an infrared drone discovered Rejony's body beside the track; it seems he had jumped from the train when it was travelling at its full speed of 116mph (186 km/h) and died instantly. It is believed to be the first time in French railway history that a driver has committed suicide by leaping from a high speed train that was in service. *Times, 27 Dec 2024*.

Two men, aged 37 and 59, from Portland, Oregon, were reported missing by family members on Christmas Day. They were said to have set off on a three-day search for Sasquatch in the Gifford Pinchot National Park in southwest Washington State and were supposed to have returned on Christmas Eve, but did not show up. CCTV enabled police to track the men's car to the small community of Willard on the southern edge of the park, which prompted a massive search of nearby wooded areas, a known hotspot for Sasquatch sightings. The local Chamber of Commerce even offers an itinerary for Sasquatch hunters that directs them to the areas where the creature has supposedly been spotted. Over 60 search and rescue volunteers carried out what the sheriff's office described as "a gruelling three-day search over difficult terrain and harsh weather conditions". They were aided by dogs, drones and US coastguard helicopters that scanned the area with infrared cameras. The bodies of the men were eventually located in a particularly thickly wooded area of the forest where they had died of exposure. They had been ill-prepared for the extreme conditions they would encounter, despite a winter weather warning for heavy snow being in place before they set off. Some reports suggested that the men were not specifically seeking Sasquatch, though, just hiking in the woods, and that the Sasquatch quest had been created as a hook by the media after one of their relatives briefly mentioned the men had an interest in the cryptid. *knoxnews.com, 2 Jan 2025.*

When his cat Styopka went missing from his home in the Kirishsky District, near Leningrad in Russia, Dmitry Ukhin, 55, spent two days looking for him. Ukhin was eventually successful and returned home with the chunky ginger tom; however, the cat turned out to not be particularly grateful for his rescue. Shortly after they got home, Styopka turned on Ukhin and swiped at his leg, tearing a vein and leaving a deep scratch that bled heavily. As a diabetic, Ukhin's blood had a reduced ability to form clots so he could not stop the bleeding, and with his wife out, he had no one at home to help him. He eventually called neighbours to tell them he was dying. They phoned emergency services, then came round to give Ukhin first aid, but could not stem the bleeding either. By the time medics did arrive, it was too late, and Ukhin had bled to death. The killer cat's fate has not been decided, but Ukhin's wife, Natalya, said Styopka liked to walk by himself, was kind, and had been deeply attached to his owner. *the-sun.com, 27 Nov 2024*.

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Pop princess, disco queen, LGBT icon and former Ramsay Street mechanic, Kylie Minogue is now in her fifth decade as a global music phenomenon. This timely and fun-packed A-Z celebrates the diminutive yet unstoppable Aussie's life and work from her *Neighbours* beginnings and her late-80s chart blitz through to her endless transformations from "Sex Kylie" to "Indie Kylie" and mesmeric 21st century dance diva. All this and all 50+ UK Kylie hits reviewed and rated. Yes, you *should* be so lucky!

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WEIRD CRIME

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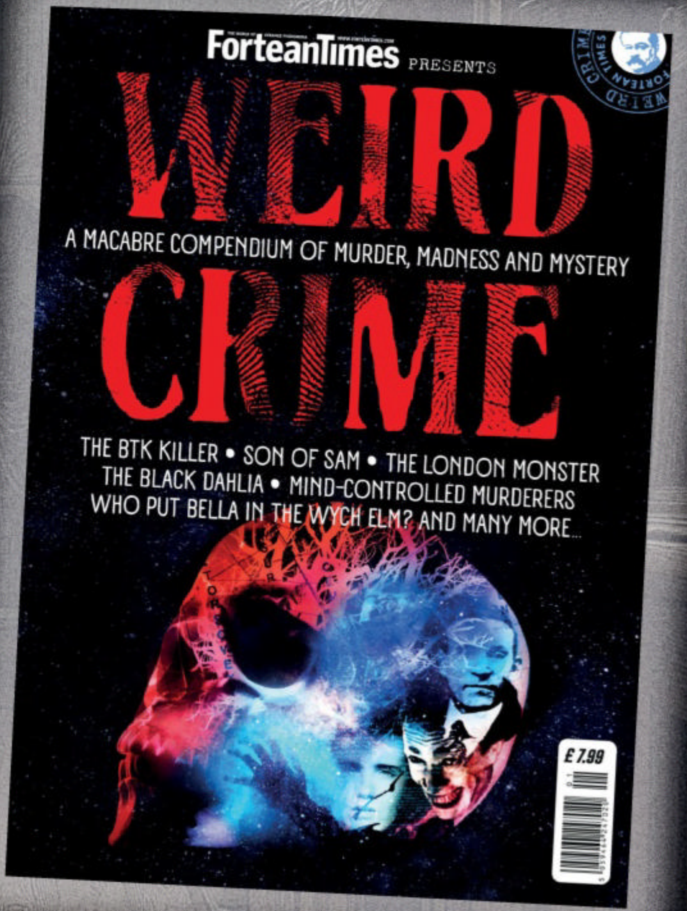
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